

3rd September 2019

Dear Speaker Pelosi,

As representatives of leading civic society and business organisations in Northern Ireland, we wish to acknowledge and welcome your repeated expressions of support for the 1998 Belfast-Good Friday Agreement and peace process.

As you will be aware, the current position of the UK Government is that it intends to exit the European Union on 31<sup>st</sup> October, with or without a Withdrawal Agreement. The Prime Minister has made the removal of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland ('the backstop') the condition for the UK's approval of the Withdrawal Agreement. This Protocol is, however, currently the only legally-binding and substantive means by which the UK and EU can avoid a hard border and protect the 1998 Belfast-Good Friday Agreement in all circumstances.

The Belfast-Good Friday Agreement reached on 10 April 1998 is not just a British-Irish peace treaty: it is an achievement of world renown. We acknowledge and recognise the key role played by many former and current members of Congress, on a bi-partisan basis, in not only delivering the 1998 Agreement, but in supporting it and the peace process ever since. Recent statements from yourself and Congressman Neal, as Chair of the Ways and Means Committee, come in this vein and offer significant assurance in the context of escalating uncertainty around Brexit.

We are also pleased to acknowledge Vice President Pence's statement at the start of his current visit to Ireland and the UK, in which he expressed the wish of the United States to "support a Brexit plan that encourages stability and also one that keeps the strong foundation forged by the Good Friday Agreement".

We are hopeful, therefore, that members across US Congress – led by VP Pence as President of the Senate and you as Speaker of the House of Representatives – will work closely to ensure that these common ambitions for preserving stability and peace in Northern Ireland are realised. This letter serves to elaborate the essential conditions for this.

The United Kingdom itself has acknowledged that its withdrawal from the European Union presents a significant and unique challenge to the 1998 Agreement. Looking ahead, the future trade and security deals that the UK has with the EU and other countries could destabilize the conditions crucial to outworking of the 1998 Agreement. These threats may not come about immediately, nor would they be intentional, but they would contribute to an environment in which sustaining peace becomes more difficult over time.

To recognise this difficulty is not to credit power to the few still willing to use violence for political ends; it is simply to acknowledge the responsibility that we all have to make decisions and seek outcomes that defuse the conditions for conflict and which make for peace.

The conditions for peace created by the 1998 Agreement and which are potentially at risk in the post-Brexit environment can be summarised under four themes.

First, the normalisation of security arrangements and practices on the island of Ireland. Security is a prime concern, especially in border areas. Customs officials and infrastructure at the border have been targets for violence in the past. The Police Service of Northern Ireland has given clear warnings that the same would be true today. Moreover, experience has shown how processes of securitisation can rapidly escalate and expand, despite initial intentions to the contrary.

*Any Brexit outcome or future trade deal that leads to – either now or in the course of time – the implementation of increased security operations, infrastructure or personnel in Northern Ireland would undermine the letter and spirit of the 1998 Agreement.*

Secondly, the British government explicitly acknowledged in the 1998 Agreement that economic stability and growth in Northern Ireland is essential to sustaining peace. Economic prosperity is as much a pillar of our peace as a lack of violence. Our economy in Northern Ireland has been built upon not only 20 years of peace but more than 40 years of EU membership. We require unfettered access to both the Great British and EU markets simply to survive. Any disintegration of supply chains across these islands will cause a fundamental blow to the aspirations we hold for prosperity and thus sustainable peace. *Any Brexit outcome or future trade deal that brings economic harm, instability and long-term disinvestment to Northern Ireland would undermine the letter and spirit of the 1998 Agreement.*

Thirdly, the 1998 Agreement affirms the birthright of the people of Northern Ireland “to identify themselves and be accepted as British or Irish or both, as they may so choose”. People born in Northern Ireland have a right to equal treatment irrespective of their choice to be British, Irish or both. Furthermore, the 1998 Agreement includes important provisions on Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity for which EU law and practice has provided a supporting framework in Northern Ireland.

*Any Brexit outcome or future trade deal that causes a diminution of rights of those residing in Northern Ireland, including in the area of protection against forms of discrimination, or which undermines the principle of equality of citizens would undermine the letter and spirit of the 1998 Agreement.*

Fourthly, the 1998 Agreement formalised and deepened cooperation between unionists and nationalists, Northern Ireland and Ireland, and between the island of Ireland and Great Britain, across a wide range of political, economic, security, societal and cultural contexts. *Any Brexit outcome or future trade deal that undermines the totality of relationships underpinning the 1998 Agreement or which causes reversal of cross-border cooperation, specifically the operation of the North-South implementation bodies, would undermine the letter and spirit of the 1998 Agreement.*

Therefore, we are asking Congress to scrutinise any future trade deal with the UK very carefully, to ensure full compliance with the 1998 Agreement. We urge Congress to satisfy itself that the truly transformational foundations for peace and prosperity here, which were laid with the indispensable aid of the United States, are not undermined in any manner by decisions to be taken in Congress.

Any assistance that we – as a cross-sectoral, cross-community, non-political ad-hoc consortium of civic and business representatives in Northern Ireland – may be able to give will be gladly offered.

We are conscious of the urgency of these endeavours, given the growing sense of danger in Northern Ireland and our diminishing capacity to avert it – not least in light of the further diminution of democratic means of accountability in Westminster.

In order to facilitate such cooperation, a delegation from our group will be visiting Washington, DC in the week beginning 16 September. We would be grateful for the opportunity to meet with you and Congressional colleagues from both the Republican and Democratic parties during that time.

**Signed:**

*Centre for Cross Border Studies*

*Children's Law Centre*

*Committee on the Administration of Justice*

*Community Foundation for Northern Ireland*

*Disability Action Northern Ireland*

*Federation of Passenger Transport NI*

*Freight Transport Association (Northern Ireland)*

*Human Rights Consortium*

*Londonderry Chamber of Commerce*

*Manufacturing NI*

*Mineral Products Association NI*

*Newry Chamber of Commerce*

*Newry & Mourne Co-operative & Enterprise Agency*

*Northern Ireland Committee, Irish Congress of Trade Unions*

*Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action*

*Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association*

*Northern Ireland Retail Consortium*

*Retail NI*

*UNISON Northern Ireland*

*Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers*

*Women in Business NI*

cc. Congressman Richard Neal and Congressman Peter King