

NORTHERN IRELAND NEWS

Theresa Villiers bluntly told she's wrong over post-Brexit border



Brexit campaigners Boris Johnson and Theresa Villiers pictured during a tour of Wrightbus factories in Ballymena and Antrim. Picture by Paul Faith/PA Wire

JOHN MANLEY (<http://www.irishnews.com/other/ourjournalists/2015/05/01/authors/john-manley-129988/>)



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Former secretary of state Peter Hain. Picture by Colm O'Reilly

SECRETARY of State Theresa Villiers has come under unprecedented pressure over her insistence that the Irish border would be unaffected by Britain's exit from the European Union.

The Tory MP appears increasingly isolated in her assertion that the long-standing Common Travel Area between Britain and Ireland can prevail after a 'leave' vote in the June 23 referendum.

But despite doubts being raised by Taoiseach Enda Kenny, Irish foreign affairs minister Charlie Flanagan and former PSNI chief constable Sir Hugh Orde, Ms Villiers remains steadfast in her belief that free movement between north and south would continue unabated.

A report from her own government's Cabinet Office has contradicted the secretary of state's claim, while Lord Nigel Lawson, the chairman of the Vote Leave campaign, also flagged up the likelihood of a hard border being imposed should Britain sever its ties with Brussels.

However, according to Ms Villiers, the former Conservative chancellor "hadn't been fully briefed" when he made the claim in April on the BBC.

Last night, one of her predecessors accused the secretary of state of putting her personal beliefs ahead of her duty to the people of Northern Ireland.

Peter Hain said he has "always been of the view that there will be a need for border controls" if the UK leaves the EU.

"Open borders were the cornerstone of the Good Friday Agreement. I think Brexit will jeopardise future stability," he said.

"If I was a resident of Northern Ireland I'd be first in the queue to vote remain. Given all the security issues around Europe I cannot believe anybody will agree to open the border."

He added: "I think she's putting her own anti-EU dogma ahead of her duties as secretary of state.

"Her duty is to the people of Northern Ireland - not to freelance on an exit-Europe crusade at the expense of hard-fought peace and stability."

In an interview with The Irish News, Ms Villiers again insisted that there need not be any controls along the Irish border should Britain leave the EU.

Despite Charlie Flanagan saying it would be the remaining EU states, rather than London and Dublin, that would decide the arrangements, the secretary of state remained adamant that nothing would change.

She said keeping an open border was in the interests of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

"There is no reason why we should have to scrap it (the common travel area) and looking at the evidence given by the Irish ambassador to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in parliament, it was clear that it was in the interests of the Irish government to try and ensure that the open border continued," Ms Villiers said.

"I would find it surprising if either country set about trying to dismantle an arrangement which has served us both well for very nearly 100 years."

Former police chief Hugh Orde launched a stinging attack on Ms Villiers

Responding to Sir Hugh Orde's sharply worded criticism of her previous claims about the border's post-Brexit status, the Chipping-Barnet MP said: "We are not going back to security towers... it's just not going to happen."

Earlier this week, the former chief constable said Ms Villiers's pledge that a British vote to leave the EU would not lead to border controls was "untenable".

He claimed the secretary of state "continues to keep her head firmly stuck in a peat bog".

Ms Villiers said there would be unrestricted movement between both parts of Ireland and Britain, with no passport or immigration controls.

"You don't have to have physical checks at a border in order to enforce immigration rules," she said.

Listen: the secretary of state speaks to political correspondent John Manley



The secretary of state said illegal immigration would be tackled using measures that were currently in place, including restrictions on landlords letting to people without visas and sanctions for employers who used unauthorised foreign workers.

She said the Leave campaign had carried out research which looked at a number of scenarios and the consistent conclusion was that it was in the interests of the Republic and the UK to keep the border open.

Political reaction

Ms Villiers's immediate predecessor backed her claims about the border.

Fellow Conservative Owen Paterson, who helped negotiate the updating of the Common Travel Area in 2011, said it had “existed before the European institutions were even created and can continue after we vote leave”.

“It is so clearly in our mutual interest that continuing it is a no brainer. Similar arrangements exist elsewhere between EU and non EU countries so the precedent already exist. To claim otherwise is scaremongering and myth making.”

However, Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin added his voice to those questioning the secretary of state’s position, saying a Brexit vote would signal a hard border and “all the negative connotations that go with it”.

“She (the secretary of state) is either genuinely unaware of the reality of the border and its implications, which raises its own questions – the alternative, her claim that the UK’s exit from the EU will have no effect on its international border, is simply not credible,” he said.

Sinn Féin MEP Martina Anderson said Ms Villiers did not have a single vote in Ireland and her support for a Brexit was not in the interests of the north.

“We are opposed to the reintroduction of border controls on the island of Ireland as well as additional tariffs and barriers to trade,” she said.

SDLP leader Colum Eastwood said Ms Villiers was failing to listen to those voices in authority who said “the back door could not be left open”.

“Teresa Villiers forgets if you’re not at the table then you’re on the menu – we would be very much at the mercy of the EU when it comes to matters which affects it,” he said.

“The crux of the matter is that there is no plan B, no guarantees of a happy ending.”

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