
EU'S HOGAN WARNS OF HARD IRISH BORDER IF UK LEAVES CUSTOMS UNION

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A British departure from the European Union's customs union would result in the return of a "hard border" on the island of Ireland, the country's European Union Commissioner, farm chief Phil Hogan, said on Thursday.

In an unusually frank criticism of Britain's negotiating position, Hogan said London was alone in driving a hard border in what he described as a "utopia" that existed only in the pages of the governing Conservative party's election manifesto.

Prime Minister Theresa May, who called a snap election for June 8, has said that while Britain cannot remain a full member of the customs union, she wants an arrangement with the EU which allows trade to be "as frictionless as possible".

The border between the Irish Republic, an EU member, and the British province of Northern Ireland would be the only land frontier between the United Kingdom and the EU once Britain leaves the bloc in early 2019.

"Let me be crystal clear □ no one in Brussels wants a hard border. Certainly no one in Ireland wants a hard border. So far, London is the only place driving a hard border. Allow me to be even clearer □ if London insists on leaving the customs union, this will be the road to a hard border," Hogan said in a speech in his native Kilkenny in the southeast of Ireland.

"We must do everything in our power to walk our British friends back from the cliff face of a hard Brexit and a hard border. Remaining in the customs union would avert this 'Made in Britain' disaster from occurring."

May has said she does not want a return to the "borders of the past", a reference to military checkpoints that marked the frontier until a 1998 peace deal ended three decades of violence between Catholic nationalists seeking a united Ireland and Protestant unionists who wanted to keep the province British.

In negotiating guidelines agreed last month, EU leaders said the unique circumstances on the island would require flexible and imaginative solutions. These included the aim of avoiding a hard border.

In equally frank remarks, Hogan also blamed "the Brexit mess we are left with" on successive British governments inability to face down the "lies" of British tabloid newspapers and instead seeking to ride a wave of populist euroskepticism.

(Reporting by Padraic Halpin; Editing by Alison Williams)

Kaynak/Source: