# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **TITLE**  | **33rd Meeting of the British Irish Council (15 November, Dublin)** |
| **DATE**  | **22 November 2019** |
| **BY** | **Mark Drakeford AM, First Minister** |

I attended the 33rd meeting of the British Irish Council in Dublin on 15 November. I was accompanied by the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services. The Taioseach, Leo Varadkar TD, chaired the meeting. Other attendees included the Rt Hon Julian Smith MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; the First Minister of Scotland, Rt. Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP; and the Chief Ministers of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man. Senior civil servants from Northern Ireland also attended as observers.

It had been expected that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, would lead the UK Government delegation, but he withdrew the day before. It remains a source of disappointment that the Prime Minister once again failed to attend; we were however assured that if Mr Johnson is returned to office, he looks forward to attending in the future.

The theme of this meeting was Misuse of Substances. The Deputy Minister attended a constructive and informative inter-Ministerial discussion on this topic, and the Council also discussed the matter. The Council agreed that this was a particularly appropriate and useful matter for BIC consideration: the challenges facing each administration are similar, and there is clear benefit in our sharing approaches and experiences.

Inevitably the discussion on Recent Political Developments largely focused on Brexit, which in different ways remains a matter of major concern to all of the member administrations. In contributing to the debate, I made three points:

* That the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration in final form should be remitted to the British electorate for decision in a referendum, so providing a choice between the UK’s withdrawal in accordance with the negotiated terms or its continuing membership of the European Union. In the meantime, I gave it as my view that, based on the vote taken on 22 October 2019,the National Assembly would not give its legislative consent to the Withdrawal Agreement Bill as introduced;
* That, whatever might be the ultimate decision on Brexit, the United Kingdom remained a voluntary association of four nations, and that the UK required significant constitutional reconstruction if it was to survive; and
* That the British Irish Council would remain an essential component of our constitutional arrangements, and that now, twenty years after its first meeting, was an appropriate time to review its role, particularly in the context of Brexit. The Council agreed with this assessment, and the Secretariat has been asked to bring forward a discussion paper for further consideration.

Also under this Agenda item the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland reported on the latest inter-government and inter-party discussions about restoration of devolution in Northern Ireland. He reminded the Council that 13 January 2020 represented an important statutory deadline for these discussions, and that a failure to agree by that date would as a matter of law almost inevitably lead to the calling of new Northern Ireland elections.

This was a valuable and important set of discussions, to which all member administrations actively contributed. A joint Communiqué was issued after the meeting: [https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/communiqu%C3%A9s/33rd%20Summit%20Held%20in%20Dublin%20Communique.pdf](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.britishirishcouncil.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fcommuniqu%25C3%25A9s%2F33rd%2520Summit%2520Held%2520in%2520Dublin%2520Communique.pdf&data=02%7C01%7CAntonia.Castello%40gov.wales%7Cc3a31ed03c294b1c0f7708d76d10e54c%7Ca2cc36c592804ae78887d06dab89216b%7C0%7C0%7C637097791641434170&sdata=wUJjmzvkXbt2LPK8LQfJF1uWWjWlj012rZz6qlvFzXM%3D&reserved=0)

The Council will meet again in Scotland next June.