

Twitter Thread by Tony Connelly



Tony Connelly

[@tconnellyRTE](#)



Some compelling evidence at the NI Affairs Committee this morning on Brexit, the risks of smuggling, organised crime, the "soft underbelly" of the Irish border, the loss of the European Arrest Warrant and what might replace it

2/ Giving evidence were Simon Byrne, chief constable of the PSNI, Mark McEwan, assistant chief constable, Steve Rodhouse, of the UK National Crime Agency, and Steve Tracey, of HMRC. Here's the gist of what I've just filed for [@rtenews](#) online:

3/ A UK law officer has raised the prospect of intl organised criminals trafficking drugs, people + firearms into the UK via Ireland because of tighter controls at GB ports thanks to Brexit. He also suggested that Ireland may have to tighten security at its ports accordingly.

4/ Steve Rodhouse, DG of Operations with the UK National Crime Agency, said organised criminals would be making a "fundamental choice" as to whether they continue to traffic drugs, people and firearms into the UK via English ports...

5/ ...or whether they might decide to switch routes into the UK through Northern Ireland via the Irish Republic. Mr Rodhouse told a House of Commons committee that such trafficking was already underway through what could be termed the "soft underbelly" of the Irish border.

6/ "We are seeing relatively small numbers, but we do see people being trafficked into the UK via the Republic to date and then moving on through ferries and the like into GB. We are very much alive to that risk," he told the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

7/ He was asked by the committee chair if he agreed with an earlier published assessment by the NCA that Brexit could mean the island of Ireland becoming "an attractive backdoor to the broader UK criminal market."

8/ Mr Rodhouse said his views were "akin" to those of PSNI Chief Constable Simon Byrne who had earlier told the committee that the land border could be seen as "the soft underbelly of the Common Travel Area."

9/ "There are organised criminals out there who might consider that to be the case," Mr Rodhouse said. "Equally there are others who feel there are opportunities to access the UK through other routes. It would be wrong to ignore the possibility to

see the Republic as a way in.”

10/ He said organised criminals were “agile” and would be deciding whether a greater presence of UK Border Forces at English ports, and more data about what might be hidden in freight consignments coming in from overseas, could mean an incentive to use Ireland instead.

11/ “They have a choice to make as to whether they feel that any changes to the rest of GB ports post-Brexit will mean they should change their routes coming into GB via the Republic,” he said.

12/ Steve Tracey, the Asst Dir of the Organised Crime Directorate within HMRC told the cttee: “The organised crime groups are very agile, they will look to see where the loopholes are, they will look to examine where they can best take advantage of any weaknesses in the system.”

13/ The DUP’s Gregory Campbell asked both witnesses if Ireland needed to increase its security at ports accordingly.

14/ The Foyle MP told Mr Rodhouse: “We have to try to ensure that the Republic does their duty and their job, ... because that would be a gap into the UK that criminals could exploit if they thought they were less diligent in the Republic than we are in the UK.”

15/ Mr Rodhouse replied: “Yes, I accept that. Clearly that’s an important aspect of our protective security as it is with other borders across Europe.”

16/ He added: “I would agree with your fundamental point. Of course, it is helpful for UK security for the Republic’s borders to be as effectively policed as possible.”

17/ The committee heard evidence from both the PSNI, the National Crime Agency and HMRC that a replacement would be needed for the European Arrest Warrant (EAW), which Britain will formally leave on January 1.

18/ Without the EAW, or any replacement mechanism, Dublin and London would have to rely for cross border extraditions on a Council of Europe convention dating back to 1956, the committee heard.

19/ Whereas an EAW could be triggered and executed within 48 days, it would take a year for an extradition to be expedited via the Council of Europe convention, the hearing was told.

This year 45 extraditions have been sought north and south through the European Arrest Warrant.

20/ The PSNI Chief Constable Simon Byrne said there had been “hundreds of years” of people engaging in smuggling and contraband “right back to the middle ages through to current times” on the island of Ireland.

21/ He said cooperation between the PSNI and Gardai would continue, and could be enhanced despite Brexit, depending on the outcome of the current negotiations on the future relationship.

22/ He said the PSNI would be "acutely aware" that they needed to support the Garda from January 1 when it came to monitoring the land border, and the risk of "300 plus crossings being exploited by organised crime groups smuggling any one of a range of things."

23/ Mr Byrne said the difference between EU tariffs and UK tariffs in the event of no deal could be one factor in a potential increase in smuggling.

24/ He also told the committee that the PSNI would be monitoring any potential loyalist protests at Northern Ireland ports implementing the Protocol "if they see that the port boundary represents any threat to their perspective of the Union."

25/ "While we're keeping an active eye on it, there is no immediate prospect of it," he said. He told the Committee that he did not expect to see any dramatic changes on January 1.

ENDS

And I should of course correct Gregory Campbell's title - he's MP for East Londonderry and not Foyle (and apologies to Colum Eastwood...)