

Barnier's blame game. EU-UK negotiations update

The fourth negotiating round between the UK and the EU has ended as expected, with both Michel Barnier and David Frost stating that no significant progress has been made.

As with earlier negotiating rounds, Barnier read out a [Lengthy statement](#) on-stage before answering journalists' questions in a [virtual press conference](#), whereas Frost simply issued a [short written statement](#).

As expected, Barnier is blaming the UK for the lack of progress. It has been clear [ever since the exchange of public letters](#) between Frost and Barnier a fortnight ago that Barnier's propaganda narrative would be one of broken UK promises. And sure enough, on Friday he claimed that the UK was backtracking on the Political Declaration: We cannot and will not accept this backtracking on the Political Declaration; All we are asking for is for the Political Declaration to be respected and complied with.

The idea that the EU's demands are contained in the Political Declaration, and the UK is now going back on what it agreed to earlier, is of course nonsense. The Political Declaration is necessarily vague on details, because the hammering out of those details in negotiations had to wait at the EU's insistence for the transition period. Both the UK's and the EU's proposals, despite the wide gulf between them, are compatible with the broad-brush outlines and ambiguous terminology contained in the Political Declaration.

For example, the wording on the **level playing field** can equally well fit either the EU or the UK interpretation of what it should consist of. It refers to appropriate mechanisms to prevent distortions of trade and unfair

Understand. Why, he added indignantly. (It's worth watching Veterans for Britain's video clip [here](#) for a full appreciation of Barnier's uncharacteristically bad-tempered tone).

There is of course a common sense, practical reason why the UK might not want to propose texts on defence and foreign policy. Given the limited time available to conclude a deal (something the EU never ceases to complain about, even though they willingly agreed to the current timescale), it makes sense to concentrate all energies on the core agreement, i.e. an FTA. If defence and foreign policy cooperation were genuinely mutually beneficial (and genuinely cooperation rather than an attempt to bind the UK in to EU systems), this is something that could quite easily be agreed in a subsequent bilateral agreement. The fact that it is something that the EU wants and the UK does not should perhaps tell us something about whose interests it would serve.

The other comment of note from Barnier was a strange **veiled threat of a hard border in Ireland**, something which we were previously told the NI Protocol (the backstop) in the Withdrawal Agreement guaranteed would not happen. Barnier was responding to a question from an Irish journalist who cited an op ed by political commentator Newton Emerson [in the](#) _____. Emerson had accused the EU of playing games with the peace process with its maximalist position on checks between Northern Ireland and mainland Britain, which he claimed pose an economic threat to retailers in Northern Ireland. After much bluster and waffle, having just accused the UK of not always being cooperative on technical issues Barnier suddenly said, But you know what the alternative is if we fail. We would have a hard border on the island of Ireland.

It was not clear what fail referred to here it could not refer to the failure to agree a deal on the future relationship because the backstop was intended as an insurance policy against this very eventuality. The most natural interpretation is that Barnier meant

namely the UK's [current planned minimalist approach](#) as contrasted with the maximalist approach being demanded by the EU. In other words, Barnier appears to have admitted for the first time that the EU could compel the Republic of Ireland to put up a hard border between North and South. An idle threat maybe, but nevertheless it is quite the statement, and it is surprising (or some might say, not so surprising) that our media has not picked up on it.