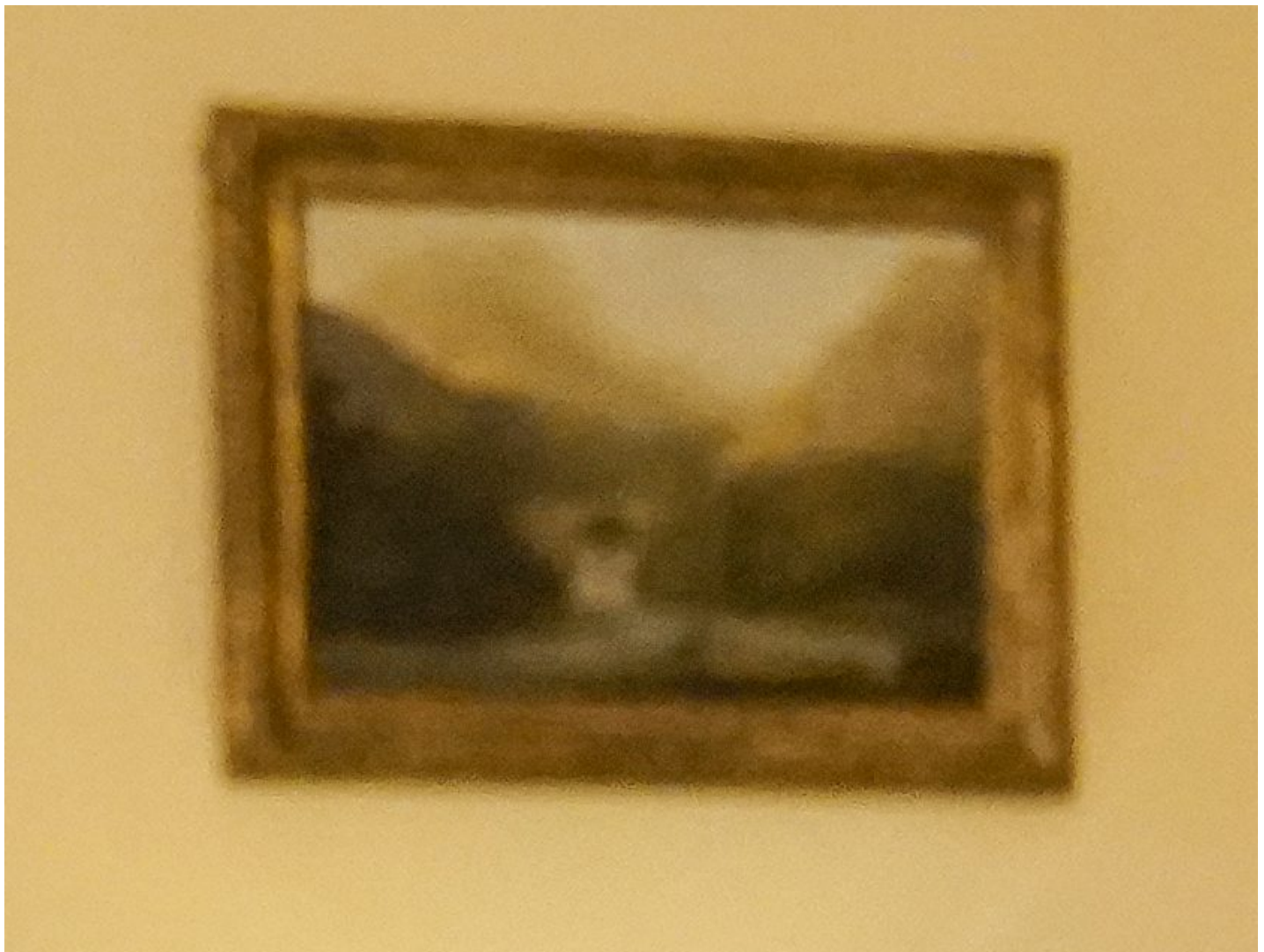


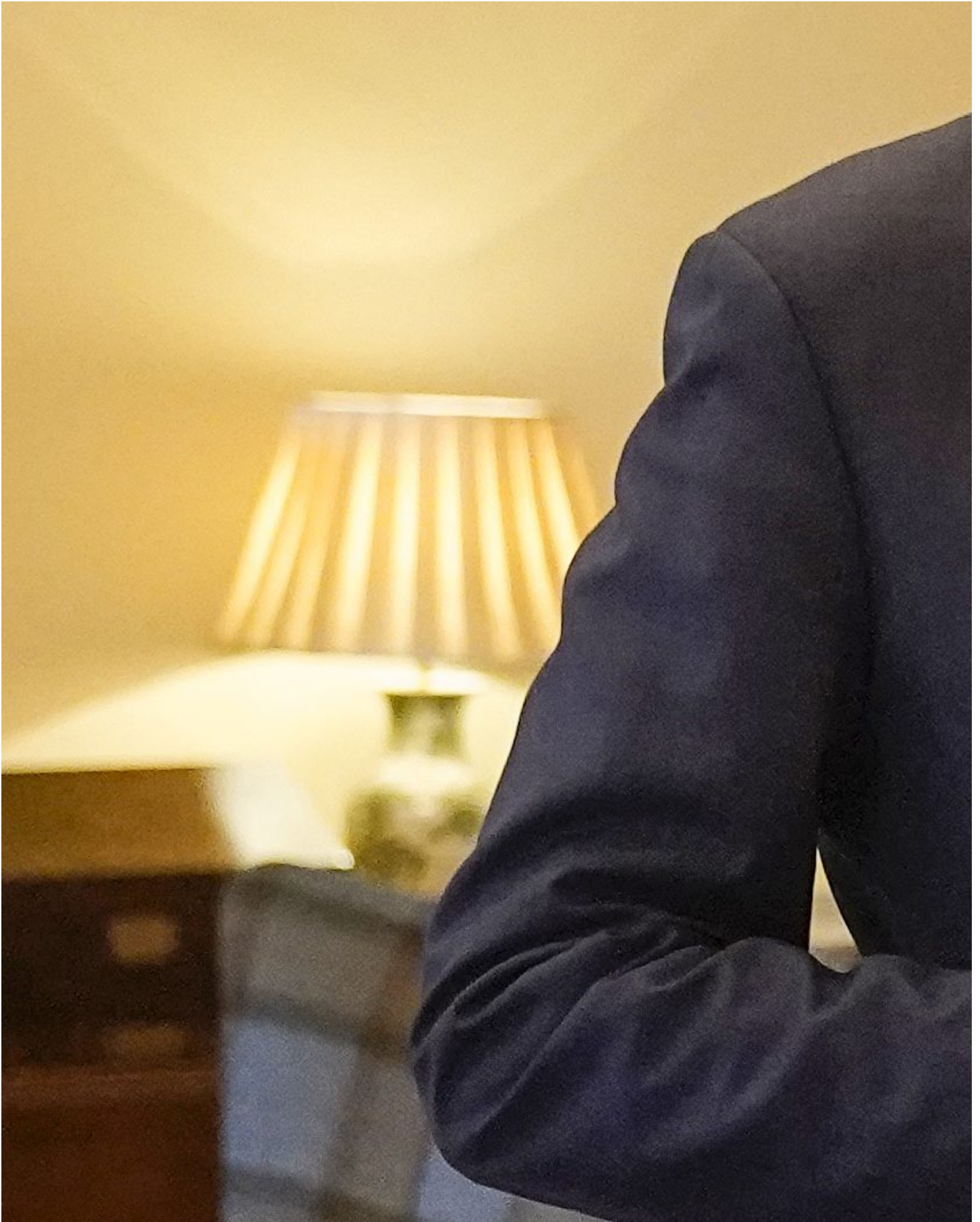
# Forging a new relationship in the crucible of Northern Ireland: why the UK needs the EU to trust it

*We are in for a long, bumpy, and, potentially, dangerous ride as the UK and EU work out how to live next to each other in a post-Brexit world. Successfully forging a new relationship in the crucible of Northern Ireland requires the EU to trust the UK, argues **Sydney Nash**. This is because the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland demands cooperation, he underlines.*

There are four fundamentals to keep in mind when considering how this relationship might develop:

1. All roads lead to the border. This was true at every critical moment during the negotiations and will continue to be the case as the new relationship develops.
2. The only objectives that matter are defending sovereignty (UK) and defending the single market (EU). Almost all disputes will be a variation of the UK resisting what it perceives as encroachments on its sovereignty, and the EU resisting what it perceives as the UK seeking unfair access to the single market.
3. The UK's current government has no interest in having a good relationship with the EU. While Prime Minister Boris Johnson may talk of "European friends", actions speak louder than words, and these demonstrate that the government is comfortable with, feels that it is necessary to, and/or is actively pursuing a combative relationship with the EU.
4. Neither side trusts the other.





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When these are taken into account, it is hard to imagine a world where the UK and the EU will quietly work together to repair relations, build trust, and implement the agreements that they have signed. So those hoping for a quiet life are going to be disappointed. There are going to be many moments when the UK and the EU will fall out, and more often than not, they are going to fall out over Northern Ireland. Managing what happens in Northern Ireland is one of the few areas of the UK/EU agreements (beyond broad implementation) where there is shared responsibility. Much of the rest of the relationship is set up to be transactional, but the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland (the Protocol) demands cooperation. It is in the context of Northern Ireland that the new UK/EU relationship will be forged, and their ability to live with each other truly tested.

What is concerning is that we appear to be in a vicious cycle where an absence of trust encourages a combative approach, and that combative approach helps undermine trust. All that is then left is the UK and EU's contrasting priorities clashing within the crucible of Northern Ireland. What might make matters worse, is if the application of these priorities, particularly by the UK, becomes more absolute (the EU's position is already fairly absolute). It is only in the context of the Protocol that the UK made a significant break with its desire to defend its sovereignty at all costs. Unlike in Great Britain, EU rules (some, not all), still apply in Northern Ireland. This was a price this government was willing to pay in 2019 to break the impasse in the negotiations and win an election; but its actions since would suggest that it wants a refund.

If the government decides that the Brexit it agreed is, in fact, intolerable because part of the UK remains subject to EU rules, and that it will do whatever is necessary to address this, it is left with three options:

1. Rip up the Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol, and unilaterally erect a border on the island of Ireland.
2. Allow Northern Ireland to exit the UK.
3. Renegotiate key elements of the Protocol.

Options one and two come with significant risks. Option three is extremely difficult but is by far the most palatable if the government really cannot live with the Protocol as it stands. However, if renegotiation is what the government wants, then it needs to go back to the fundamentals of its relationship with the EU and change the ones that are in its control. Specifically, it must address the lack of trust in the relationship. It can do this, in part, by dialling down its combative approach. It can also build trust by doing all it can to implement the Protocol as it stands.

Unless the government demonstrates that it wants to make the new arrangements for Northern Ireland work, not just wreck them, the EU will never be able to trust it. If the government does this and it is clear that the Protocol does not work, then it can justifiably ask that a discussion begins about changing it. And, if sufficient trust has been built up, the EU might be willing, not only to have that conversation but to take a less absolutist view of its own priorities if it concludes that that is what is necessary to create a sustainable framework for future relations.

Ultimately, all roads will continue to lead to the border, and contrasting priorities will always result in the UK and EU clashing on occasion, but it is still within the government's gift to make the ride we are on less bumpy and less dangerous.

*This post represents the views of the author(s) and not those of the Brexit blog, nor of the LSE.*