

Parliamentary Briefing Internal Market Bill 14 September 2020

The Law Society is the independent professional body for 200,000 solicitors in England and Wales. We represent and support our members, promoting the highest professional standards and the rule of law.

The Bar Council represents approximately 17,000 barristers in England and Wales. It is also the Approved Regulator for the Bar of England and Wales. A strong and independent Bar exists to serve the public and is crucial to the administration of justice and upholding the rule of law.

1. Introduction

This joint briefing outlines the views of the Law Society of England and Wales and the Bar Council in relation to the Internal Market Bill ahead of its Second Reading in the House of Commons.

The Bill, which was published and had its first reading on 9 September, makes provisions concerning the Northern Ireland Protocol and its stipulations on state aid and trade, and aims to guarantee unhindered trade between Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales. It also creates secondary powers allowing Ministers to provide financial assistance through regulations.

The Law Society and Bar Council have significant concerns on clauses 41 to 45 of the Bill. Although the subject matter is relatively narrow and technical in scope, focusing on trade with Northern Ireland, this is a highly charged political issue not only in the negotiations with the EU but also in the context of the Bill itself, which replicates various issues familiar from the EU internal market as principles to be developed in the narrower context of UK domestic law. It also has potentially serious ramifications for the relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom, for individuals and businesses with connections to the island of Ireland.

When this briefing note was substantially complete, the authors were provided with a copy of a letter from the House of Lords Constitution Committee of today's date addressed to the Lord Chancellor raising a number of the same issues - the Law Society and Bar Council agree with the concerns expressed in that letter and note the request to the Lord Chancellor to indicate how these proposed measures comply with international law.

Key recommendations

Clauses 41-45 of the Bill should be removed from the Bill for the following reasons:

- i. These provisions enable Ministers to derogate from the obligations of the United Kingdom under international law in broad and comprehensive terms and prohibit public bodies from compliance with such obligations. They represent a direct challenge to the rule of law, which include the country's obligations under public international law.
- ii. There is a significant risk of violation of the United Kingdom's international law obligations, including the principle of good faith and sincere cooperation in the Withdrawal Agreement.
- iii. There will be implications on the reputation of the UK around the world as a country with which to do business. This will be of global and long-term effect, particularly in the context

of the ongoing negotiations with the EU and with other countries. The slightest threat could damage the rule of law and the perception of the UK as a credible and predictable trade partner, as well as the UK's position as a centre for international legal practice and dispute resolution, and the global use of English law.

- iv. There will be negative consequences on the continuing cooperation with other jurisdictions in relation to civil judicial cooperation and enforcement of judgements. The Bill could be highly prejudicial to the Government's application to accede to the Lugano Convention.
- v. The provisions could raise significant conflict between the courts and executive with regard to judicial review.

We therefore urge support for amendments 1, 2 and 3, and any others to similar effect that are yet to be tabled.

2. Challenge to the rule of law

Clauses 41 to 45 of the Bill represent a direct and apparently deliberate challenge to the rule of law, which must be understood, including by the United Kingdom, to include its obligations under international law.

These provisions enable Ministers to derogate from the obligations of the United Kingdom under international law in broad and comprehensive terms and prohibit public bodies from compliance with such obligations (particularly clause 44(1)).

We are unaware of a precedent for such an approach in UK legislation or administrative practice, which cuts across numerous statements of high judicial and political authority confirming the country's consistent commitment to upholding the rule of law.

Furthermore, these measures affect the legal hierarchy of sources established in the Withdrawal Agreement (in violation of article 4 and 5). If the Bill is passed as introduced, the Northern Ireland Protocol and associated caselaw would have a subordinate role dependent on ministerial interpretation.

3. Potential breach of public international law

While the UK is no longer a Member State of the EU, the transitional period has not yet expired. We are therefore concerned that the effect of the proposed legislation will be to place the UK in breach not only of the specific provisions of the Northern Irish Protocol but also of the wider principles of good faith and sincere cooperation that continue to bind the UK under the general provisions of the Withdrawal Agreement during the transitional period.

It would be very undesirable for the UK to be placed in a position where the EU could accuse it, with considerable force, of a deliberate and fundamental breach of its general obligations during the transition period, with potentially far-reaching adverse effects both on the legal interests and international reputation of the United Kingdom.

Experts have suggested that the Bill could violate the principle of good faith and sincere cooperation in the Withdrawal Agreement. This could lead to dispute settlement proceedings being commenced against the UK and, and, therefore, a risk of retaliation from the EU including the suspension of trade as set out in the Withdrawal Agreement.

4. Implications on the reputation of the UK around the world

We are concerned at the implications of this initiative for the reputation of the UK around the world, including as a centre for international legal practice and dispute resolution, particularly in the context of the ongoing negotiations with the EU and with other current or prospective trading partners.

Given the stated ambition of the Government to be a leader in global trade, including in respect of professional services, which is one of the most important UK economic sectors, it sends a negative message to cast doubt on our willingness to abide by our international commitments or to retain a discretion to depart from such commitments at the discretion of UK Ministers.

The resulting damage to the UK's reputation would likely make prospective trading partners – including key Government targets such as the US and Australia, and important growth markets for the legal sector such as India and Brazil – far more wary of entering into trade agreements with the United Kingdom.

5. Implications on civil judicial cooperation

The Government has formally requested for the UK to accede to the Lugano Convention at the end of the transition period to enable civil judicial cooperation with our closest neighbouring jurisdictions to continue on an efficient basis. This is a sensitive political issue, where the UK is seeking to persuade other Member States and signatories, and the EU itself, to approve the UK's application. Again, we are very concerned that the present initiative will severely undermine those efforts and will cause significant prejudice to the reputation of the UK.

The UK no longer being party to the Lugano Convention is not in the interests of access to justice for UK and EU businesses and citizens, who will be affected by delay and disruption to the assertion of their legal rights.

6. Effect on judicial review

Clause 45 would exclude judicial review of any regulations made under clauses 42 and 43 on grounds of incompatibility with domestic law, including human rights measures, as well as international law. This has implications for the rule of law and the principles of access to justice, which are themselves a core component of the rule of law.

It is unclear how the courts would interpret an "ouster clause" like this one: precedent suggests that only an ouster clause expressed in clearly unequivocal terms would hold up and would in any case not prevent a judicial review challenge based on an error of law.

This provision would also contravene the Withdrawal Agreement (direct effect provisions, Article 4 Withdrawal Agreement). This provision provides a right for individuals to directly rely on the Withdrawal Agreement provisions and challenge the UK or EU implementation in national courts, where they have clear, unambiguous rights under the Agreement. The individuals and businesses therefore have a right to ask for a judicial review under the Withdrawal Agreement and the UK cannot unilaterally deviate from this without breaching its obligations.

This Bill is therefore likely to cause significant conflict between the courts and executive with regard to judicial review.

Finally, even if the effect of the "ouster clause" was to prevent any domestic challenge to measures that were in breach of international commitments of the UK, there is a substantial risk that these issues will

be litigated at the international level, with further adverse implications for the international reputation of the UK and its Government.

7. Absence of justification for the proposed measures

The Law Society and Bar Council do not believe there is a justification for the proposed measures. We are, however, aware that the Treasury Solicitor has resigned as a result of this initiative and of direct criticisms expressed by Sir Bob Neill MP, the Chair of the Justice Committee and by a number of other very senior parliamentarians.

The Law Society and the Bar Council have seen the statement from the Attorney General setting out the government's legal position on the Bill and the Northern Irish Protocol. We have also seen reports of advice given by the Attorney General to the effect that the commitment to the rule of law reflected in the ministerial code is limited to obligations under UK domestic law. If those views have been accurately reported then the Law Society and the Bar Council respectfully but fundamentally disagree with them.

In particular, the Law Officers note in their published statement itself recognises that, *"it is an established principle of international law that a state is obliged to discharge its treaty obligations in good faith. This is, and will remain, the key principle in informing the UK's approach to international relations."* The Law Society and the Bar Council agree with this statement, which reflects the consistent approach of the UK and its Courts to its obligations under international law.

However, the statement goes on to state the conventional "dualist" doctrine of UK domestic law, and to restate the principle of Parliamentary sovereignty, reaching the conclusion that, as a matter of UK domestic law, there is nothing unconstitutional or unlawful in Parliament adopting legislation that is inconsistent with its international obligations. This analysis is correct viewed exclusively as a matter of pure domestic UK law but it does not address the points that are of concern to the Law Society and the Bar Council, that the proposed approach is directly incompatible with the discharge of the legal obligations of the UK under international law.

The general position recognised by the Government of the discharge of treaty obligations in good faith, is clearly jeopardised by the proposed legislation. The UK remains bound by its specific obligations of sincere cooperation under the EU Treaties during the transitional period and equivalent obligations expressly set out in Article 4 of the Northern Irish Protocol. The Law Society and the Bar Council are of the view that the proposed adoption of legislation that is deliberately designed to confer powers on Ministers to act incompatibly with international law and to prohibit compliance with obligations imposed by an international treaty ratified by the UK and endorsed by Parliament, constitutes a clear breach of those aspects of the rule of law.

8. Recommendation

In light of the arguments made above, we urge the Government to remove clauses 41 to 45 and support amendments No. 1, 2 and 3.

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