# DUP deputy first minister embarrassed by recruitment of Northern Ireland trade official amid Irish Sea border denial



In a recent revelation stemming from a Freedom of Information request, Emma Little-Pengelly, the deputy first minister and a member of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), expressed significant embarrassment over plans to recruit a Stormont official to oversee post-Brexit trade arrangements. She described the situation as “hugely politically embarrassing for me,” highlighting the apparent contradiction to the DUP's assertion that the Irish Sea border is no longer in effect.

The internal communication, which unfolded in October between Little-Pengelly and Jayne Brady, the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, sheds light on the DUP's concerns regarding the proposed appointment of a ‘head of regulatory divergence’. This position pertains directly to the management of trade arrangements in Northern Ireland following Brexit, and its advertisement appeared to contradict the assurances previously made by the DUP regarding the removal of the Irish Sea border.

The exchanges began when Little-Pengelly noticed the recruitment drive for the regulatory role, which was launched little over six months after the DUP had resumed participation in the Northern Ireland Assembly based on an agreement described as the ‘Safeguarding the Union’ deal with UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. This deal was portrayed by the DUP as a means to eliminate the Irish Sea border, a claim that has now been brought into question.

DUP leader Gavin Robinson later acknowledged that his predecessor, Jeffrey Donaldson, had “oversold” the deal, which subsequently did not prevent the introduction of regulations that reaffirmed Northern Ireland's divergence in trade from the rest of the UK.

In one of her messages, Little-Pengelly noted, “I understood we were not recruiting at the moment. Who on earth named this and how did they think this wasn’t going to attract attention and concern?” She further highlighted the implications of the UK's policy on regulatory divergence amidst ongoing discussions with the EU. This concern culminated in her cautioning Brady that the situation could potentially develop into a news story, demanding urgent attention.

In response, Brady assured her that she would address the matter, confirming her lack of prior knowledge about the hiring initiative. The situation escalated when a unionist activist tweeted criticism regarding the DUP's involvement in the recruitment of a ‘Divergence Co-ordinator’, prompting Little-Pengelly to alert Brady of the emerging controversy.

Brady later informed Little-Pengelly that the role in question was an existing position that needed to be filled rather than a new initiative. However, the political ramifications of the recruitment plan became sensitive enough that, after media inquiries were posed to the Executive Office, Little-Pengelly requested a clear separation in any public communications, stating that “this was not a ministerial decision.”

In reaction to these exchanges, Traditional Unionist Voice leader Jim Allister remarked, “the exchange highlighted that the Irish Sea border remains and Stormont is helping to implement it.” He contended that the communications reflect the DUP's focus on damage control rather than addressing the ongoing challenges related to the Northern Ireland Protocol. Allister pointed out that new trade barriers continue to emerge, underscoring the complexities of Northern Ireland's post-Brexit status.

The details of the communications were first brought to public attention by the Belfast Telegraph, reinforcing the considerable political implications surrounding the governance and representation of Northern Ireland’s trade relations after Brexit.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2024-02-19/deputy-first-minister-says-significant-gains-made-in-dup-irish-sea-border-deal> - This article discusses Deputy First Minister Emma Little-Pengelly's refusal to confirm the removal of the Irish Sea trade border, highlighting the DUP's position on post-Brexit trade arrangements.
* <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/northern-ireland-cannot-become-collateral-in-eu-us-trade-war-says-emma-little-pengelly-ITU27QFRNRAWBAAUGCTBDU25QA/> - Emma Little-Pengelly's statement on Northern Ireland's position in potential EU-US trade disputes, emphasizing the region's trade challenges post-Brexit.
* <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/politics/emma-little-pengelly-says-dup-wants-to-protect-access-to-both-eu-and-uk-markets-after-sammy-wilson-says-its-a-choice-4464534> - Emma Little-Pengelly's clarification on the DUP's stance regarding access to both EU and UK markets, addressing internal party perspectives on post-Brexit trade.
* <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2023/08/17/dup-in-meaningful-engagement-on-restoring-ni-assembly/> - The DUP's engagement with the UK government over post-Brexit trading arrangements, highlighting concerns about Northern Ireland's trade status.
* <https://www.breakingnews.ie/ireland/ni-cannot-become-collateral-in-eu-us-trade-war-says-little-pengelly-1740175.html> - Emma Little-Pengelly's remarks on Northern Ireland's vulnerability in potential EU-US trade conflicts, underscoring the region's trade complexities post-Brexit.
* <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-41119237.html> - Emma Little-Pengelly's defense of the DUP's position on post-Brexit trade arrangements and the party's stance on devolution, reflecting internal party dynamics.
* <https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/stormont-recruitment-for-irish-sea-border-role-was-hugely-politically-embarrassing-for-dup-deputy-first-minister-VQEOMFOGOJDMJNAT4H7Q43MBOA/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data