

**Minister for European Affairs Helen McEntee TD at the Joint Oireachtas  
Committee on European Affairs, 5 July 2017**

**\*\*\*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY\*\*\***

Chairman

I am delighted to be here this afternoon, the first time I have had the pleasure of being before this committee since I was appointed Minister for European Affairs last month. I was honoured to be asked to take on this important job at a time when Ireland's place in the European Union is centre stage.

Ireland's future prosperity is best served by our membership of the European Union. Brexit only serves to underline that our membership of the single market and customs Union are the cornerstones of our economic success. We are all too well aware of the disruption and negative impact that Brexit may have on key sectors of our economy, but that does not in any way weaken the case for our remaining committed members of the European Union – quite the contrary.

Mr. Chairman,

I look forward to working with you and members of the Committee to deepen our national and parliamentary dialogue on the full EU agenda. National parliaments and Committees on European Affairs play a vital role in EU policy formulation and implementation and in ensuring that the EU improves its engagement with all of our citizens. I want to assure you my openness to working with you in the period ahead.

In the time available today I would like to touch on three issues: the outcome of last month's European Council; the unfolding debate on the Future of Europe and say a few words about the incoming Estonian EU Presidency.

One of my first official engagements following my appointment as Minister for European Affairs was to accompany the Taoiseach to the June European Council. Items on the agenda included security and defence; migration; jobs, growth and competitiveness; external relations; the Paris Agreement on Climate Change; and Digital Europe. The Taoiseach has already made a comprehensive statement to the Dáil so I am not proposing to go into great detail now. I will touch on a few key issues:

On **Brexit**, the EU's chief negotiator Michel Barnier updated the European Council in Article 50 format – that is the 27 member states minus the UK - on the recent opening of formal negotiations with the UK, which were seen as generally positive and constructive. In line with the EU guidelines, the Irish-specific concerns - protecting the Good Friday Agreement and the gains of the peace process; avoiding a hard border through imaginative and flexible solutions; and maintaining the Common Travel Area – will be prioritised in this first phase of the negotiations, before we move onto discussions about the shape of the future relationship.

### **Jobs, Growth and Competitiveness**

The European Council considered a range of economic issues under the heading of Jobs, Growth and Competitiveness. The President of the ECB, Mario

Draghi, gave a generally positive presentation about the EU and Eurozone economies.

There was a discussion of the Single Market and trade policy. Members will be aware that Ireland has a high level of ambition for the Single Market, particularly with regard to cross-border trade in services and in advance of the European Council we worked with like-minded partners to ensure that a specific reference to Services was included in the Council Conclusions. We strongly support the priority the incoming Estonian Presidency has attached to Digital Europe.

On Trade, the Taoiseach stressed our support for a robust, free trade policy, upholding an open and rules-based multilateral trading system.

## **Security and Defence**

The discussions on security and defence covered both the internal and external aspects. Discussions covered efforts to tackle the spread of radicalism online and its financing. The challenges inherent in tackling terrorist communications, while at the same time safeguarding privacy, were acknowledged.

On the external dimension, the High Representative Federica Mogherini, briefed on the implementation of the EU Global Strategy one year after its adoption. Ireland strongly supports the strategy, and we have emphasised the need for the comprehensive implementation of all five of its priorities - important if all Member States are to contribute and play an active part. Using the Union's unique mix of diplomatic, civilian and peace-keeping capabilities

will help protect our citizens, and contribute to peace and security in our neighbourhood and beyond.

The strategy also provides the framework for EU cooperation with NATO, focused on peace-keeping and maintaining international peace and security. Ireland's neutrality is of course fully respected, and we do not participate in any military alliance. However, we favour initiatives to strengthen the EU's capacity to act as an international peace provider, particularly in support of the United Nations. We also support cooperation within the Union to achieve common objectives in response to the range of new and growing threats.

### **Migration**

While there have been some positive developments on Migration – particularly a significant decline in activity along the Eastern Mediterranean route – the situation remains critical in terms of irregular arrivals through the Central Mediterranean. The Council agreed to improve coordination efforts here, provide more support for Italy, and try to end the tragic situation where so many people are losing their lives.

Ireland has consistently called for a comprehensive response to the migration crisis that responds both to its effects and to its underlying root causes.

We have agreed to take in up to 4,000 asylum seekers and refugees; to provide naval vessels to help with search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean; and to supply humanitarian assistance to those affected by the Syria crisis – and to date, we have provided over €78 million.

On the **External Relations** items on the agenda, the Council expressed regret at President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. On sanctions against Russia, the Council decided that Russia's ongoing actions in eastern Ukraine left little choice but to renew the restrictive measures for a further six months. This is a decision which Ireland fully supports. Leaders discussed relations with Turkey where concern was expressed about the human rights' situation there. And finally, the President of Cyprus updated the European Council on the ongoing UN-sponsored talks between the two communities on the island.

### **Future of Europe**

Chairman, I would now like to turn to the debate on the Future of Europe on which I know this committee is actively engaged. As you know, on 1 March the European Commission published a White Paper on the Future of Europe. As well as setting out the main achievements of the EU over the past six decades, the White Paper addresses the challenges that Europe is facing and presents five scenarios for how the Union could evolve by 2025, depending on how it chooses to respond.

The Commission has since published five accompanying reflection papers on a range of diverse topics which will also contribute to the Europe-wide discussions that this White Paper seeks to initiate. The Government has welcomed the Paper. We believe it contains much valuable food for thought both about the international context as it is now and may develop over the coming decade, as well as setting out a number of scenarios for how the EU might evolve and develop in the period ahead. The White Paper takes an open and non-prescriptive approach and is presented as an initial contribution to a

Europe-wide discussion and debate. This open, inclusive and transparent approach is welcome and is in keeping with the need to renew the EU's contract with its citizens.

The European Commission will lead a public engagement strategy to discuss and debate the future of Europe in all member States. I understand that the head of the Commission Representation in Ireland, Mr Gerry Kiely, was before this committee last month to facilitate an initial exchange with members on the White Paper. I would be interested to hear from you what themes emerged from that discussion. I understand too that you are planning a call for public submissions on the Future of Europe for later this month. There is clearly an important role for national parliaments, Europe-wide, to play in debating the Future of Europe and the Oireachtas should of course facilitate and encourage as wide ranging a debate as possible on this matter of national importance. I believe that the Joint Committee on European Affairs is best placed to take a lead role in this and I am happy to encourage the lead you are taking.

Ideally, that debate should be followed in the autumn by a wider Government-led consultation process. The outcome from the process that this committee has launched will be an important contribution to Government's consideration in the autumn. That consultation process should of course be as inclusive as possible involving all interested parties – including Social Partners, Voluntary Sector, academics and members of the general public. It is important that the debate engage the public to the greatest extent possible. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is currently examining a number of options for facilitating and encouraging that wider debate.

Finally, I would like to say a brief word to welcome the new Estonian Presidency of the Council which has just begun. I know that the Estonian Ambassador to Ireland *Her Excellency Mrs Kristi Karelsohn* is here and will address you shortly on her country's priorities. Ireland welcomes the priorities identified by Estonia with their emphasis on preserving our shared values of prosperity, security, peace and stability in Europe. We particularly welcome the focus on a Digital Europe and Estonia's intention of holding a summit meeting in Tallinn on 29 September to discuss Europe's digital future. We wish the Estonian Presidency well for its upcoming six months.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee today and I look forward to working with you and the members of the Committee on promoting Ireland's place in the European Union.