

Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on EU Affairs, 28 February 2018:



Noelle O Connell, Executive Director of European Movement Ireland, on transparency in European Institutions and Ireland's involvement in them

Chair, distinguished Members of the Committee,

Thank-you for your invitation to engage once again with the Joint Oireachtas Committee on EU Affairs. My name is Noelle O Connell, Executive Director of European Movement Ireland, and I am here today with my colleague Nora Trench Bowles, Policy and Advocacy Manager. I am pleased to have been invited to contribute to these deliberations and discuss transparency in European Institutions and Ireland's involvement in them.

The Committee is to be commended for deliberating on this issue which is crucial in bringing decision-making closer to EU citizens and in increasing democratic accountability.

By way of background, founded in 1954, European Movement Ireland is Ireland's longest established not-for-profit membership organisation dedicated solely to European issues.

The mission of our organisation is to develop the connection between Ireland and Europe. It forms part of our values, and has been key to much of our work as a civil society organisation for more than 60 years, to ensure transparency and engagement at all levels in Ireland's ever-evolving relationship with Europe.

As such, the issue I will engage with the Joint Oireachtas Committee on EU Affairs on today is of particular significance to our organisation and, indeed, permeates through much of our different endeavours.

The last time I presented to the Committee was in October last year with Maurice Pratt, Chairman of European Movement Ireland, when we had a fruitful and timely discussion with the distinguished Members on the Future of Europe. Welcoming this engagement, as we said then, the input of national politicians and Institutions with European issues is a crucial bridge between citizens and the EU, and amplifies and attaches greater significance to Ireland's voice in the EU.

As part of our presentation to the Committee in October, we called for greater national debate on the Future of Europe, emphasising the limited window of opportunity to input into this critically important and moving process – coming as it does at what is a critical juncture in the EU's evolution. This engagement also helps promote transparency and engagement as vital in underpinning and lessening any connections deficit between EU Institutions and citizens.

Since that time, I'm pleased to report that the Future of Europe has been the principal focus of European Movement Ireland's work – indeed, as it will continue to be for a number of years.

Launched in November last year in the Science Gallery by Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD, Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade with special responsibility for Brexit, Simon Coveney TD, and Minister of State for European Affairs, Helen McEntee TD, we have been working in partnership with the

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in carrying out a country-wide public consultation on the Future of Europe.

We welcome the ongoing commitment by the government to furthering and facilitating this vital debate. We are pleased to be playing our part, particularly considering European Movement Ireland's long-standing aim to encourage contribution at all levels to debates about how to best progress European issues particularly here in Ireland.

Ireland's future remains steadfastly in the EU. Every year, we commission Red C to conduct an independent survey of the Irish public's views on Europe. Public opinion on Ireland's membership of the EU has remained very high and fluctuated little since 2013, peaking at 90% support in 2016 but remaining in the high 80s ever since we began polling. There is little evidence that the Irish public support the view that we should follow the UK out of the EU, indeed support for this idea has dropped by 13% since 2013. This sentiment and high support for Ireland's membership of the EU is also reflected in Eurobarometer surveys.

In saying that, reasoned and robust debate on what we, as Irish and EU citizens, would want a reforming EU to look like is important. It helps us to formulate our own views and thoughts on these multi-faceted issues – in the process, progressing, inputting into and influencing the European-wide debate which will shape all our future for decades to come.

In this light, we are proactively engaging with people around the country by hosting Citizens' Dialogues.

These regional events have been designed with a bottom-up approach in mind to garner people's needs, concerns and positions – complex and nuanced as they may well be. People around the country are encouraged to get involved and have their say, and we have been engaging them on many wide-ranging and critically important questions concerning:

- A prosperous and competitive Union;
- A safe and secure Union;
- A sustainable Union;
- A socially responsible Union;
- Shaping globalisation.

Spearheaded by Minister of State for European Affairs, Helen McEntee TD, we have already hosted lively Citizens' Dialogues in Connacht (Galway) and Munster (Cork). Conversations as to how we wish to see the EU develop, and Ireland's role in this, have been frank, enlightening and very informative.

Rather than concentrating on Brexit – which undoubtedly will create many challenges for Ireland given that we will be the remaining Member State most adversely affected by the UK's decision to leave the EU – it is interesting to note that people around the country are thinking beyond Brexit and of the big picture. What would we like the EU to look like in 20, 30, 40 years' time? How do we in Ireland want to shape and influence it?

We hope that this process will help to spark a nationwide debate on the Future of Europe – and we would call on the distinguished Members of the Joint

Oireachtas Committee on EU Affairs to continue to help to lead and guide that debate.

We will be hosting further Citizens' Dialogues in Ulster (Co. Donegal) on 8 March and in Co. Meath on 19 April. A major event will follow in Royal Hospital Kilmainham, Dublin on Europe Day, 9 May.

There has been widespread interest in this series of national Citizens' Dialogues. We were very pleased to see it recognised at a European level when the European Commission referred to Ireland as an example of best practice in communicating with EU citizens as part of the wider Future of Europe debate.

Discussions at these Citizens' Dialogues have touched upon the need for more awareness/understanding of and engagement with European initiatives, and the need to better communicate and explain what the EU does. European Movement Ireland is firmly of the view that these elements, which form the foundation of much of our work, feed into the wider context of the importance of transparency.

Another area where Ireland has been touted as an example of best practice across Europe is the mandatory lobbying register. On a European level, the European Commission and European Parliament have jointly operated a lobbying register since 2011 – on which European Movement Ireland is one of nearly 12,000 registrants.

Following on from a European Commission proposal, negotiations on a mandatory EU Transparency Register covering the European Commission, European Parliament and the Council are due to start in the coming months. European Movement Ireland welcomes this development to further transparency requirements across the main EU decision-making Institutions, and will follow with interest the results of the upcoming negotiations.

I am aware that the Joint Oireachtas Committee on EU Affairs is investing considerable time hearing from experts on the topic of transparency in European Institutions, including from the European Ombudsman earlier this month. Indeed, it is great to see an Irish woman, Emily O'Reilly, at the helm of this important body, leading work which impacts the lives of EU citizens when it comes to their dealings and engagements with the EU Institutions.

European Movement Ireland welcomes the recommendations of the European Ombudsman to increase transparency of the Council legislative process. As the European Ombudsman advocated in her address to the Committee, better facilitating public scrutiny as to how governments across the EU Member States position themselves in EU law-making could go some way in enabling stronger accountability of those laws.

European Movement Ireland will follow with interest the Council's response to the European Ombudsman's recommendations, which is due before 9 May. While appreciating the need for Member State governments to be able to conduct diplomatic business, we would hope that the Council's response recognises the value in deepening transparency and accountability.

We will also follow with interest the progress and impact of the Dutch Parliament paper on transparency in the Council. As the paper outlines, the role of national Parliaments in overseeing and scrutinizing the Council's actions puts them in a privileged position to act. We call on distinguished Members of the Committee to support this impetus in an effort to increase accountability and democratic legitimacy in EU decision-making.

Greater transparency and accountability in this way could also help to address the tendency – on which I have often spoken, including when I have had the honour of speaking to this Committee before – of governments throughout the EU to *Europeanise failure and nationalise success*. It is crucial that we all take responsibility for the role we play in EU matters and for how we actively engage with Europe.

European Movement Ireland's role in disseminating factual information about Europe in language that is clear and understandable includes explaining the decision-making structures and processes of the EU. It is not accurate to say that 'faceless bureaucrats' decide on EU laws; rather it is our national democratically elected and accountable Ministers and our MEPs directly elected by EU citizens.

In this light, as the Committee is aware, we regularly produce 'Just the Facts' policy briefings and 'All EU Need To Know' explainers. This week, the Committee will have received a 'Just the Facts' on the informal European Council meeting which took place on Friday last – including explainers on the composition of the European Parliament post-Brexit and the Spitzenkandidaten process.

The Accountability Campaign is another example of our work related to promoting transparency at all levels. Over many years, European Movement Ireland has tracked a variety of statistical indicators covering the Oireachtas, the European Parliament, the European Council, and the Council of the EU – and looking at Ireland's EU engagement through these Institutions.

Beyond these statistical indicators, European Movement Ireland continues to work to shed a light on and working to explain Irish engagement at an EU level.

This is particularly the case in regard to Brexit, which has been a principal focus of our work since late 2015 and particularly during 2016 and up to the present day.

As developments around the Brexit negotiations have shown, engagements outside the formal EU Institutions and structures are also crucial. The Government's programme of strategic engagement with EU partners across EU Member State capitals and on the margins of Council meetings is a strong and productive example of this.

The efforts of this diplomatic push – as well as the push made by many political, business and civil society organisations through their European networks, including our own European Movement International network – are to be commended for ensuring Ireland and the border on our island was one of the top three priorities of the first phase of the Brexit negotiations.

This success – and I'll conclude on this point, Chair – made clear once again that when Ireland engages actively, constructively and transparently at an EU level, the impact that we can have as a country can be great.

Thank-you for your attention, distinguished Members of the Committee, and I look forward to your questions.

Ends.