

## Opening statement to Joint Committee on European Affairs

3 April 2019

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Commission

Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today on the topic of alliance building. This has always been an important part of the way the EU operates but it becomes more vital than ever in the context of Brexit. I would like to commend you, Chairman, and the members of the committee for your very timely initiative in considering this important topic of alliance building looking beyond the issue of Brexit.

The EU will be very different after Brexit. Just to mention a few areas of difference

- It will inevitably be more “continental” in outlook. Among other things this means that the civil law tradition will be more dominant than in the past when the UK common law system played a big role.
- France and Germany will play a bigger role in shaping the future direction of the EU and will no longer have to contend with the questioning and reluctant attitude of the UK. The EU was already working before the UK and we joined but Ireland has never known the EU without the UK. We often saw issues in a similar way to the UK and will miss the role they played as a big Member State which was often a buffer between France and Germany.
- More than ever the Euro will be the core of the EU system and further consolidation and deepening can be expected
- Without the opposition of the UK I expect the EU to develop stronger social policies. This will be needed to respond to the

challenge of populism and the feeling among parts of the EU population that they have been left out of the benefits of globalisation and open trade. The EU needs to be able to show that it cares about all of its citizens and that stronger economic policies will be accompanied by social policies that deliver.

- I worry that that EU 27 will be more protectionist and less open to the outside world. In my view the current push to curb the competition rules and develop European champions is not a healthy development.
- I also worry that the “better regulation” agenda which has improved EU policy making through evidence based, impact assessed policy proposals resulting from wide stakeholder consultation will be given less importance without the constant UK pressure to reduce red tape.

It is clear that the changes to come post Brexit will require a different approach to Irish membership in the future. I think we have all seen during the Brexit negotiations just how deeply integrated we are, how much we benefit from things that we take for granted – but that only exist because of membership. Perhaps most of all we have seen the need to keep citizens involved and help them to feel that EU belongs to them and is not something imposed from outside.

I would like to focus on the following areas in addressing the issue of alliance building in the post Brexit era

- the need for much deeper understanding of the wishes and problems of other Member States so that we can build alliances with like-minded countries – but also to understand the positions of those who will differ from us
- the enhanced need to anticipate what proposals are likely to come from the Institutions and other Member States and to seek to influence them at an early stage

- the need for earlier work with others on proposals we want (or do not want) to see agreed
- the need for continuous information to our citizens on how and why the EU is changing and Ireland's place and role within it.

### Deeper understanding of other views

There is a need for a systematic approach. Successive enlargements of the EU have made it impossible to keep up to speed with thinking in all other Member States unless an active information gathering and exchange system is in place. New technologies have made it easier to contact people directly – but with less certainty as to whether they represent a considered national or sectoral position and not just their own views.

In Ireland we attach importance to personal contacts and so do our EU partners. Building relationships over time, based on deeper understanding of other points of view, is the key to good alliances. There is a tendency to form groups of “like minded” Member States and that serves a very useful purpose. There are long established group such as the “Francophonie” and the Benelux as well as newer ones like the Visegrad and the new Hansa League. But it is important not only to speak to those who are like-minded and always to reach out to those who hold different views from us. The EU is all about finding workable compromises that allow it to move forward in the interest of all its members. So reaching out to those with different views is a crucial part of seeking agreement.

Ireland has received huge solidarity from the other EU countries and the EU Institutions throughout the Brexit process. This has been achieved by the mobilisation of politicians and diplomats with a clear message, investing the time in travel and contacts with partners who have been willing to take a serious interest in the case we put. We

will need to maintain this effort in future. We have to reach out beyond the English speaking world to our continental partners and that means travelling to them and keeping in touch on a regular basis, not just when we have a problem. This is likely to require some staff increases not just in the Department of Foreign Affairs but in all Departments involved in EU matters. It will also require bigger travel budgets so that politicians and officials regularly visit different capitals as part of building deeper alliances. In many ways it will need the same kind of mobilisation as we do for each Presidency of the EU – and Ireland has a very good track record of successful presidencies.

The good news is that all smaller Member States are coming to the same conclusion – that they need to work together permanently to ensure that the voice of smaller Member States is heard. This is not just a task for the government. The Oireachtas can do very useful work with other national parliaments and all social partners and civil society have a role to play in building lasting alliances.

There are two organisations that I know of that I believe can play an incredibly useful role in supporting this process. I am on the Board of both of them and I regard my *pro bono* membership as a continuation of my years of public service. I am referring to European Movement Ireland (EMI) and the Institute for International and European Affairs (IIEA), organisations that are undoubtedly well known to members of this committee. With their connections to other Member States and in their different roles both can play a huge role in helping to inform Ireland about changing EU priorities and help formulate wise national responses. However both have to spend a lot of time and resources on fundraising every year. They are most grateful for the public funding they get – but in my view it is important to support them in ways that allow them to devote themselves to the challenges that lie ahead instead of being engaged in a constant quest for project funding.

Of course alliance building should not only be confined to working with other Member States. There is a similar need to invest in the EU Institutions. We have seen the role the Commission has played in support of Ireland throughout the Brexit negotiations and in general the Commission sees itself a true friend of the smaller Member States. My generation of Irish EU staff is retiring and the general representation of Irish staff in the Institutions is falling. We need to encourage young people to think about a career in the EU and perhaps to take more active measures to support them when they make that choice. Without in any way interfering with the independence of Irish EU staff they can be an important source of information and guidance on what is happening across the Institutions.

#### Anticipating future proposals

The EU now has a well-developed body of law and in many areas there is less need for new legislation apart from keeping it relevant and up to date. However, there are many new challenges where EU level action is more effective than uncoordinated national level action.

In recent years the Commission has been developing an overall set of policy proposals for its 5 year mandate which are then updated annually. 2019 will be a key year for setting the policy priorities for the coming 5 years. The Heads of State and Government will meet in Sibiu, Romania on 9 May – a meeting I know this Committee is aware of - to set out their views just ahead of the European Parliament elections. The new President of the Commission will be probably be nominated in June and will then be voted on by the Parliament in July on the basis of his/her priorities and work programme. EP committees will seek to influence that programme through contact with the new President and in the hearings they will hold on all nominees for the post of Commissioner. In the Council Member States will also want to contribute to shaping the programme and not leave it to bilateral discussions between the Commission and the EP.

**So the coming months will be extraordinarily important in terms of setting the future direction of EU policy. Of course there will be adaptations and new crises that will call for fresh responses but the priorities decided this year will be the backbone of the EU agenda to the end of 2024. I hope civil servants and stakeholders are getting ready to feed in their ideas and to respond to those put forward by their counterparts in other Member States.**

### Influencing future proposals

The Commission invests a lot of time in consulting and involving stakeholders long before it tables formal proposals. Unfortunately many stakeholders, including sometimes Member States, do not get involved early in the process and then have to scramble to develop last minute positions and try to have them taken into account. In my view Ireland would benefit from early discussion of upcoming proposals, not just across government but also through the early involvement of stakeholders. This would give many opportunities to feed in an Irish perspective in the development of new proposals. It would also enable a wide range of Irish stakeholders to work with their opposite numbers in other Member States to develop “like-minded” positions. If government and stakeholders can work together there will also be benefits for wider public understanding of how the EU works and of how Ireland can help to shape it.

### Need for continuous citizen involvement

The EU has long suffered from a bad press as a remote and soulless technocracy. The British Eurosceptic press has campaigned against it over many years and used ridicule to undermine valuable progress in many areas. Here in Ireland we have seen strong public desire to understand and be part of what the EU is doing and the consequences when people feel alienated. We may be enjoying a sort of Brexit dividend at the moment in terms of Irish support for the EU but it is hard to maintain such a high level of debate in more normal times.

Yet I feel we need a step change in how information is circulated on the EU and on giving a greater sense of citizen involvement. It is possible to make a complex, technical organisation like the EU accessible to citizens – if we take the time and invest the necessary resources.

Fora like the Citizens Assembly, the All Island Civic Dialogue on Brexit and the Irish government's Future of Europe Citizens Dialogue national engagement process show what can be done. We need a permanent programme of citizen involvement, not just an issue based one. Stakeholder organisations can make a valuable contribution and organisations like EMI and the IIEA that I have already mentioned have key roles to play. I would like to see more frequent debates in the Oireachtas on EU policies – there are examples in other Member States which are worth examining. Could there be more regular reporting to the floor of the Dail from this Committee on significant meetings and issues as they develop?

We need to find ways of having real debate in the media, away from the kind of polarisation and personalisation that is all too often how EU differences are portrayed.

The first step is to agree that we need a deeper, more inclusive and permanent debate. I'm sure that many good ideas will then flow. Rather than setting up yet another new body to run this I think the injection of an EU dimension into many ongoing processes would be more flexible and useful in the longer term.

## **Conclusion**

We all know the EU will be different post Brexit. The question is how to prepare to get the best out of the next stage of our membership. Alliance building will be an important component. There are Member States with which we have a lot in common and it will be easier to work with them on a regular basis than with those

whose views are rather different from ours. However, Ireland is not geographically or politically naturally part of any existing grouping – and this can be an advantage. Depending on the issue we should seek to work with different alliances. I have also explained why I think we need to strengthen alliance building at home through early stakeholder involvement. Finally, the most important alliance of all will be with our citizens. They need to feel that their voice is heard and their views matter in the next stages of EU development. As we have seen through several referendum campaigns we need a higher and more sustained level of communication and information with citizens to keep up the high level of support for the EU in this country.

I wish you, Chairman and the Committee, continued success in your important deliberations and I look forward to reading the report of your work upon the committee's conclusion.

Catherine Day

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