

Joint Committee on European Union Affairs
Alliance-building to strengthen the European Union

Opening statement by Aingeal O'Donoghue

17 April 2018

Mr Chairman, I want to thank you and the Committee for the invitation to discuss alliance-building to strengthen the European Union. I am joined by Joe Hackett, Deputy Permanent Representative, and by Ciara Delaney, Director, and Claire Callaghan, Deputy Director, in the EU Division of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Working closely with a range of EU partners has always been important for Ireland, but, as the Committee has rightly pointed out, some of the changes occurring this year provide further impetus for this work. These include the European Parliament elections in May; the appointment of a new Commission and European Council President; national elections in a number of Member States; the adoption of a new Strategic Agenda to guide the work of the Union and, of course, Brexit.

We are all well aware of the unprecedented challenge that Brexit poses to the European Union as a whole and Ireland in particular. The solidarity shown by Member States has been remarkable, much appreciated, and a key strand of our engagement with partners in the period since the Brexit referendum. But, as committed and engaged members of the Union, we also want to share perspectives and develop common approaches on the full range of issues on the EU agenda. This is not only a matter of pressing Irish priorities on others, but also of listening to friends and partners to hear and understand their concerns and perspectives.

While we have always worked closely with a range of Member States, the United Kingdom has been an important partner for Ireland on many issues in the European Union. This is true, not just for Ireland, but for a range of like-minded countries. It has been clear to us

that the loss of the UK as an EU partner would be significant, and we have undertaken a comprehensive review of our alliances within the EU, with a view to strategically strengthening and diversifying our relationships.

Our approach is multifaceted and includes:

- intensifying our relationships with the Nordic-Baltic Member States and the Netherlands with whom we share a common approach in areas such as EU trade policy, the single market, the further development of the Eurozone and the ambition of the Digital Single Market;
- deepening our relationships with larger Member States and the European Institutions in order to explain Ireland's position across key policy areas including sensitive areas such as further developing EMU, taxation, defence and migration;
- deepening our relationships with key Eastern European Member States, particularly with the eastwards shift of the EU centre of gravity; and
- deeper engagement with a range of Member States on an issue-by-issue basis, whether as part of a group or individually.

Ireland works hard to influence the policy and legislative agenda of the EU, safeguard our interests and make a positive contribution towards the future direction of the Union.

This is done through effective engagement with the EU institutions and increased capitals to capitals engagement both at political and official level; through our Permanent Representation in Brussels, under the guidance of Ambassadors Declan Kelleher and Joe Hackett, where around 65 officials from almost every Government Department are based; and through mobilising our network of embassies in every capital across the European Union. These efforts are supported by colleagues working across Government at home and underpinned by deep political engagement, including a sustained increase in the range and intensity of visits at Prime Ministerial, Ministerial and senior official level.

In 2018, for example, and keeping the United Kingdom separate, there were over 50 outward visits to other Member States involving the President, the Taoiseach, the Ceann

Comhairle, or Government Ministers and approximately 30 high level political visits inwards to Ireland.

Last month, Ministers visited all 27 EU capitals as part of the Government's St. Patrick's Day programme. Such visits not only offer the opportunity to celebrate our national culture and our diaspora, but also to build and deepen relationships at a political level and to raise broader awareness of Ireland's priorities through engagement with local media, parliamentary committees and think tanks.

The 50 outward engagements I mentioned above did not include attendance at EU Council meetings where Ministers also regularly meet their colleagues in the various sectoral formations. As the Tánaiste has said taking part in the formal discussions and decisions is essential, but these meetings are also an opportunity to build strong relationships with new and established colleagues, both individually and as part of wider groups.

Before the March European Council, for example, the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Rutte of the Netherlands participated in a Nordic-Baltic group meeting. The group includes the Prime Ministers of Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. The Minister for Finance now meets regularly with his Nordic, Baltic and Dutch colleagues before each ECOFIN Council and the Tánaiste has hosted the same grouping of Ministers in advance of the Foreign Affairs Council.

The more Ireland engages with other Member States on the key European issues, the more we will enhance our capacity to shape and influence the future. We, therefore, actively participate with a range of partners through a number of like-minded groups linked to particular issues. Ambassador Hackett will speak more about this during his presentation.

Ireland is already, by some way, the smallest country with an embassy in every other Member State. This has been an invaluable asset in increasing understanding of our strong economic recovery and fostering support for our concerns in the Brexit negotiations and advancing our interests on key issues on the EU agenda. Since the referendum in the UK, we have added senior officials to our embassy teams in the Permanent Representation to the

European Union, Berlin, Paris and London. This year we are increasing our diplomatic representation in Madrid, Warsaw and Rome and reinforcing a number of other Embassies including our Single Diplomat Missions.

Last year, the Tánaiste published a comprehensive review of Ireland's relationship with Germany. The report, which he launched in Dublin with German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, makes 23 recommendations for widening and deepening our footprint in Germany. We are working on implementing these, including the opening of a new Consulate in Frankfurt later this year.

The Tánaiste has similarly requested a review of our relations with France, with whom we already share vibrant links. The review is a welcome opportunity to look at what more we can do in fostering this key relationship.

We are also proactively building our relations with the European Institutions to ensure that Irish positions are understood and taken into account. As the Committee will be aware, the Taoiseach was the first speaker in the European Parliament's series of debates with Heads of State or Government on the future of Europe. In a multilingual address, he set out Ireland's positive vision for the future of the Union.

We have also developed a programme of Ministerial engagement at plenary sessions of the Parliament. Typically, these programmes include meetings with relevant chairs of Committees and rapporteurs on specific files, group leaders, other key MEPs and Irish MEPs. A number of European Parliament Committees have also visited this country and met with relevant Ministers and Oireachtas Committees. Once the new Parliament takes shape the programme of Ministerial visits will recommence.

Irish officials, working at all levels within the EU's many institutions, have also made invaluable contributions, helping to shape EU policies and legislation since our accession in 1973. However, in recent years, the number of Irish staff working in the institutions has been declining with increasing numbers of officials retiring. The Government has made it a priority to address this "demographic cliff" through the EU Jobs campaign. Over the past

month, for example, Minister McEntee addressed students in TU Dublin, NUIG, Maynooth, UCD and Trinity College to encourage them to consider a career in the EU which would help to put them at the forefront of shaping developments that affect the daily lives of citizens across the Union.

Our high level objectives are to increase number of Irish candidates applying for positions within the EU institutions through targeted promotion campaigns and to increase the success rates of those competing for these positions through the provision of appropriate support and training.

Deepening our alliances to further strengthen the European Union is exciting work but it is also challenging for a small Member State like Ireland. It requires a whole of Government approach with all Ministers and officials across Government Departments actively engaging with their counterparts around Europe.

The Oireachtas too has a crucial part to play in building this network.

Visits and meetings by the Ceann Comhairle, by the inter-parliamentary friendship groups and, in particular, by this Committee, all play a role in deepening and strengthening our engagement with other Member States.

Mr Chairman, I would now like to hand over to Ambassador Hackett to share his Brussels perspective.

Thank you.