

ICTU submission to Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs

26th June 2019

In October 2017 Congress was asked to address this Committee on the subject of Brexit and its implications. In my concluding remarks I said:

In the world after Brexit, Ireland's foreign policy in Europe will have to undergo a re-appraisal. Our traditional ally among the large countries will be gone and the Franco-German axis will probably be revived. Where will Ireland sit in this new scheme of things? Where will our allies be?

I hope to address these issues today. But firstly a brief word about how trade unions structure their international work. Traditionally the ICTU avoided international associations until we joined the EEC in 1973 when we joined the European Trade Union Confederation. The big players in the ETUC are Germany's DGB, an informal alliance of Scandinavian unions, and Italian unions, where the three confederation representing Christian Communist and Socialist tendencies work together. The French, with five major trade union centres, punches below their weight. Another big player is the British TUC. In a new development the DGB hosted a meeting in Berlin last September on governance within the Euro area. This is an echo of the increased level of Franco-German debate on a Eurozone budget.

On the issue of alternative alliances, it seems that the issue has already been decided – at least according to *The Financial Times* and *The Economist*. We have joined what is termed the Hanseatic League, a loose alliance of the Netherlands the Scandinavians and the Baltic states. Some of these countries in turn have more enduring alliances. Holland has worked in alliance with Belgium and Luxemburg since before the Treaty of Rome, while deep institutional ties exist between all the Scandinavian countries through the Nordic Union.

According to the FT of November 7 2017:

While the countries are far from united on all EU policy issues, they share a common outlook on many economic questions, favouring dynamic competition on the single market, and stressing the need for national budgetary responsibility within the eurozone.

Europe is a half-way house between domestic and foreign policy. On the foreign policy area, we have a radically different policy than some other member states – such as on neutrality and to an extent Palestine. However internal EU matters are really just extensions of domestic matters and are handled by the line departments through the permanent representation in Brussels.

We work with the ETUC on lobbying matters and through them on statutory committees on social dialogue, on migrant workers and vocational training. This is one area where Brexit may cause significant change. Up to now when discussing European proposals with Irish civil servants we would be told: 'This proposal won't progress as the British will veto it'. That response is now obsolete. A case in point is the process that preceded the adoption of the information and consultation directive

in 2002 when Ireland and the UK argued for unanimity as opposed to qualified majority voting, in order to be able to veto the measure – an attempt which, thankfully, did not prevail.

Some of the new alliances we make will be custom built. An example is France which will be our strong ally on CAP but an opponent on corporation tax. What relationship do we want with the Visegrad group of Central European countries given the number of their citizens who now live in our country? This group have traditionally taken a very hostile attitude to progress in workers' conditions or labour law.

A case in point is a recent spat between France and Germany on the one hand, and the Eastern countries on the other. France and Germany decided to apply their minimum wage laws to trucks passing through their territory – say from Hungary to Spain. The Commission launched infringement procedures against them. Bizarrely, Ireland joined with the Eastern countries, Spain and Portugal in supporting the Commission's action. How this builds our influence with France and Germany is beyond me. The decision making process in Ireland to support this stance also remains a mystery. It would be interesting to see if there was any input by legislators into this process.

In the century since the foundation of the state Ireland's foreign policy has fallen into two phases. Up to the mid-fifties it was all about regulating our relationship with Britain and protesting about partition. This reached its high point in 1949 when Sean Mc Bride offered to abandon neutrality and join NATO on exchange for an end of partition. From the late fifties the emphasis moved towards Europe in tandem with Britain's move in the same direction.

We are now heading into a third phase at a time of increasing uncertainty in world politics.