

**Statement by Ms. Helen McEntee T.D.,  
Minister of State for European Affairs, to the  
Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Union Affairs  
Wednesday, 2 October 2019**

Chairman,

I am very pleased to be invited once again to address and meet with the Committee. It has been a busy period since my last visit and, as usual, there is much to report.

I will attend the General Affairs Council on 16 October in Luxembourg. The agenda will include preparation of the October European Council and the Enlargement process in relation to Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia. At the European Council, Leaders will discuss a range of issues including the next Multiannual Financial Framework and the new EU institutional cycle.

With your permission, Chairman, I propose to first brief the Committee on the work of the General Affairs Council (GAC). I will then give an update on the preparations for the UK's withdrawal from the European Union.

***MPF***

Over the summer, the Presidency sent a questionnaire to Member States to determine their positions on a number of issues in relation to the MPF negotiations. This was followed by bilateral meetings with each Member State to discuss their key priorities. Ireland's meeting was held on 2 September between myself and the Finnish Minister for European Affairs, Tytti Tuppurainen. Our discussion focussed on Ireland's key priorities – particularly CAP - and the

overall level of the MFF. At the General Affairs Council on 16 September, Minister Tuppurainen said that these meetings had been helpful in determining the political perspectives on the negotiations. The Presidency will now prepare a paper to help steer discussions at the October European Council.

The Finnish Presidency also updated Ministers at the September GAC on its recent work on the MFF and set out its plans for the next steps. In my intervention, I said that Ireland shared concerns that Brexit may overshadow other issues at the October European Council. I noted that it was important that Leaders give a clear direction regarding the overall size of the EU budget and that we have to ensure the MFF is adequately resourced to deliver on our priorities.

### *Next Institutional cycle*

At this month's European Council, leaders will also discuss implementation of the next Strategic Agenda. Adopted in June, the Agenda will guide the EU's work for the next five years. The European Council will monitor the implementation of the priorities and give further political direction as necessary. We will work with fellow Member States as well as the new Commission and Parliament to ensure that the Agenda is successfully implemented.

In addition, Leaders will be updated on the appointment of the next Commission. Following hearings for all Commissioners-designate, the Parliament will vote on the Commission as a whole later this month. If approved, the new Commission will begin its term on 1 November. Christine Lagarde will also be formally confirmed as the next ECB President at the October European Council.

### *Enlargement*

Chairman,

I will now turn to the issue of enlargement.

The upcoming General Affairs Council will discuss whether to open EU accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania.

Ireland fully agreed with the European Commission reports in May which judged that both countries had made significant progress on the requested reforms and that EU accession negotiations should be opened this year.

I visited North Macedonia and Albania earlier in the year and it was clear that real progress has been made. North Macedonia has made great strides on its reform agenda and demonstrated significant political courage in signing and implementing the Prespa Agreement. The situation in Albania is more complex but it is clear that there has been progress across all chapter areas in the past year - the comprehensive justice reforms in particular are a significant achievement.

Ireland supports opening EU access negotiations with both countries. It is our strong preference that they both advance together. In order to maintain credibility in the region, the EU must follow through on our commitments and reward candidate countries for reforms already undertaken.

### ***Rule of Law***

In relation to the Rule of Law, the issues that have arisen in a number of EU Member States regarding failure to comply fully with the Union's fundamental values are deeply concerning. We will continue to work with the EU institutions and Member States to resolve the challenges currently faced through constructive dialogue and prevent such challenges from emerging in the future.

The September General Affairs Council discussed a number of rule of law issues. Ministers had a general discussion on Strengthening Rule of Law in the

Union, prompted by the European Commission communication in July. A formal hearing on the Rule of Law under Article 7 also took place at the September meeting to consider the situation in Hungary. In addition, the Commission briefed Ministers on the state of play regarding Rule of Law in Poland.

### ***Brexit***

Mr. Chairman, I will now update the Committee on Brexit.

The next General Affairs Council will provide an important opportunity to reaffirm with my EU27 colleagues our priorities, and the need for a solution that addresses the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland.

The EU's solidarity and understanding remains resolute – as reaffirmed by Michel Barnier when he met with the Tánaiste last week in Brussels. It is heartening to know that we face the Brexit challenge with all the stability and solidarity that our EU membership brings.

Given the current political uncertainty in London, the risk of a no deal Brexit remains significant.

Ireland, and our EU partners, stand by the Withdrawal Agreement.

However, we are committed to finding a way forward. The EU is open to considering any credible, fully worked-out proposals put forward by the UK, so long as they achieve the same outcome as the backstop.

While the UK has provided the Commission with four technical non-papers, these do not constitute formal proposals, and do not amount to legally operational solutions. As the Taoiseach stated after his meeting with Prime Minister Johnson in New York, there remains a serious and significant gap

between what the UK is putting forward as possible solutions and what the EU can accept.

### ***Preparedness and Contingency Planning***

Against this backdrop, the Government's continued preparations for Brexit have the highest priority.

We have always been clear that a no deal Brexit would result in huge disruption and severe negative economic impacts across this island. We are, however continuing to actively prepare.

This planning includes engagement at EU level, responses by Government, and actions by business and citizens.

These measures are working

We have held more than 1,200 stakeholder preparedness events, covering sectors ranging from construction to tourism and issues ranging from customs requirements to currency fluctuations.

These events are guided by advice from Departments, Government agencies, county councils and individual sectors. More than €70 million in support funds is available through Enterprise Ireland. I encourage business to access the funding that is available to them.

Continuing the approach of budgets 2017, 2018 and 2019, Budget 2020 will look to support the sectors most exposed.

As one of the UK's closest trading and business partners, Brexit will mean changes for all Irish businesses regardless of location, size or sector.

It is vital that exposed businesses in particular prepare for no deal.

The Government's 'Getting Your Business Brexit Ready – Practical Steps' campaign focuses on the 9 steps every business – large and small – should take

now to help prepare for Brexit. Since 16 September, Local Enterprise Offices have begun weekly slots on a number of local radio stations nationwide, providing information on getting businesses ready for Brexit.

Many businesses have taken the necessary steps. I would urge those that have not yet done so to look at doing so as soon as possible.

### ***Landbridge***

Given its importance as a trade route for our businesses and our economy, the Government has been working to ensure that transiting via the Landbridge remains as efficient as possible in all Brexit scenarios. These efforts are both domestic – in terms of new infrastructure and processes in place in our ports – and international.

In particular, we have been engaging with our colleagues in the Commission, and in France, Belgium and the Netherlands, to mitigate as much as possible the effects on goods transiting via Landbridge. There is a shared recognition of the strategic importance of the UK Landbridge as a transit route for all our economies.

Let us be clear – the Landbridge after Brexit will not replicate the status quo for operators. It will depend on traders being compliant with the new requirements. Detailed advice is available on the Government's Brexit website and I strongly urge all operators to consult it.

Targeted information campaigns are under way to ensure that operators are aware of the steps that they must take and the supports available to them. As noted in the July 2019 Contingency Action Plan update, operators should also be prepared for delays at UK ports in general, and the port of Dover in particular, given the general disruption that a no deal Brexit would cause.

### ***The border in a no deal scenario***

A no deal Brexit would result in far-reaching change on the island of Ireland, and risks for Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement are significant. This is not something to be taken lightly by anybody.

The Government continues to work closely with the Commission to meet the shared twin objectives of avoiding a hard border and protecting the Single Market and Ireland's place in it. This work is looking at necessary checks to preserve Ireland's full participation in the Single Market and the customs union.

Any arrangements in a no deal scenario would be suboptimal to the backstop and would have profound implications for North-South trade, including through the impact of tariffs, checks, additional costs and administrative burdens.

Avoiding the emergence of a hard border, and protecting the Good Friday Agreement, with North-South co-operation, is essential, deal or no deal. In the event of a no deal it will be a prerequisite to any negotiations on a future agreement between the EU and the UK.

### ***Conclusion***

It is important to remember that Ireland is working on preparedness and contingency planning as a committed member of the EU27 with the full support of the European Commission and other Member States.

Many of the actions aimed at mitigating the effects of Brexit are being taken at the EU level, as they involve sectors regulated by EU law. The EU has put in place contingency measures in a range of sectors of particular importance to us, such as, aviation, finance and road transport. The EU has published some 80 preparedness notices, providing guidance for businesses and citizens.

We welcome the Commission's proposal to extend financial supports should there be a no deal Brexit, by making the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund available to support Member States and affected workers. We are

engaging with the Commission and other Member States on the proposed scope and details of the measures.

Brexit presents an unprecedented challenge to Ireland. It is only by the Government, business and citizens working together and with our EU partners that we can aim to mitigate as much as possible the implications of no deal and ensure that we are as prepared as we can be for the changes it will bring.

Mr. Chairman,

I am happy to take any questions that the Committee members may have. I would like to thank you for the invitation to address the Committee and for your attention today.