

Statement by Minister of State for European Affairs, Helen McEntee T.D., to the Select Committee

I wish to thank the Chair and the Members of this Select Committee for the opportunity to discuss the motion referred to the Select Committee for consideration.

The motion that Dáil Éireann has been asked to approve is as follows:

That Dáil Éireann approves the terms of the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Cuba, of the other part, signed at Brussels, Belgium, on 12 December 2016, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 31 May 2019.

This agreement is the first bilateral agreement between the EU and Cuba and signals an important step in developing EU-Cuba relations, and in turn, in Ireland-Cuba relations. Cuba's relations with the EU have improved significantly in recent years, forming part of a general pattern of increased openness on the part of Cuba to re-engage with international partners.

This Agreement is robust and comprehensive, consisting of three main pillars, namely Political Dialogue, Cooperation and Sectoral Policy Dialogue, and Trade and Trade Cooperation. The core aim of the PDCA is to open channels of dialogue and cooperation between the EU and Cuba in order to assist the modernisation of the Cuban economy and society, strengthen human rights and democracy, and work together to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Agreement provides for a comprehensive dialogue between the EU and Cuba on a range of policy areas, including human rights; small arms and light weapons; disarmament and non-proliferation; sustainable development; terrorism; serious crimes of international concern; unilateral coercive measures; combating illicit drugs; and combating racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

The Agreement also provides for the development of cooperation including on political and legal issues, such as democracy, human rights, good governance, justice, citizens' security and migration, as well as on social, environmental, economic and developmental issues.

Most of the Agreement has been provisionally applied since 1 November 2017. However, its full application requires ratification by the EU once all Member States have completed their own internal legal procedures.

Since establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1999, Ireland's relationship with Cuba has grown significantly. The visit of President Higgins to the island in 2017 was a high point in our relations and facilitated the further strengthening of ties between our two countries. This visit also highlighted the interesting shared history between the two countries, with Irish emigrants having contributed to the economic, cultural and political evolution of Cuba over the years, and Cuban leaders having been influenced by the leaders of the Irish revolutionary and independence movements.

Cuba opened an Embassy in Dublin in 2001 and Ireland's Ambassador to Mexico is accredited to Cuba. The recent opening of two new missions in Latin America, in Colombia and Chile, has significantly increased our footprint in the region and has allowed Embassy Mexico to dedicate greater resources to developing our relationship with Cuba. 2019 marks the 20th anniversary of relations between the two countries and is being celebrated with a series of cultural events organised by our respective Ambassadors.

Ireland and Cuba are likeminded on a number of multilateral issues, such as disarmament, non-proliferation, gender equality and climate change. We signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Political Dialogue with Cuba in 2015, and have since engaged in three rounds of bilateral political consultations, where such issues of mutual concern are discussed.

It is also important to acknowledge concerns about the challenging human rights situation in Cuba. Ireland is keenly aware of the difficult situation that exists for human rights defenders and civil society actors in Cuba.

Ireland, together with the EU and our fellow Member States, continues to encourage reform within Cuba, particularly in the areas of freedom of expression, the right to peaceful assembly, the protection of open civil society space and a free, fair and open judicial system. The EU and Cuba have an annual dialogue in the area of human rights and this Agreement provides for further engagement in this important area.

Encouraging steps have been taken by Cuba, including in the recent reform of the Constitution, approved by referendum after a process of public consultation. Among other reforms, the new Constitution establishes the presumption of innocence in criminal

proceedings and the right to habeas corpus, and extends a ban on discrimination including on the basis of sexuality.

The PDCA recognises the potential contribution of civil society and specifically provides for further cooperation between the EU and Cuba in this area and encourages the active participation of civil society in the formulation and execution of development cooperation policies.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to present this motion. My assessment is that the PDCA provides a solid framework and welcome opportunity to strengthen both EU-Cuba and Ireland-Cuba relations, providing for closer economic and political ties, and also providing the framework for further constructive dialogue on human rights.

I hope the Committee will support the motion, and that Dáil Éireann may approve the terms of this Agreement so that Ireland may proceed to ratification in the near future.

I am happy to take questions at this point.