

DRAFT Statement to Joint Committee on European Affairs

11 November 2020

Thank you for the invitation to speak to the Joint Committee on the subject of “the Conference on the future of Europe”. Given the huge changes taking place today – coping with the Covid pandemic, dealing with Brexit, climate change and the impact of the digital revolution to name but a few – I think it is very important that we find a way to discuss with the citizens of the EU and to listen to how they would like to see it develop in the coming years.

Brexit has shown us all how much we gain from our membership of the EU but has also revealed how little people know about why it takes certain decisions and how it works in practice. The EU will need to change and adapt as it tackles future challenges and it will only be able to do so effectively if it carries the majority of its citizens with it. Brexit has shown us the perils of citizen detachment and disillusion. We need to reach out to our fellow citizens on an ongoing basis so that they feel informed and part of the permanent process of developing the EU.

It will not be easy to arrange an EU wide series of debates and even harder to find the common threads between the different national and regional debates. And this will have to be done in a time of pandemic which hampers face to face meetings. However, the fact that people are now used to working and communicating online may offer a way to reach more people if we can get the model right. I am currently chairing the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality which has moved online in order to continue its work. I would be happy to share some of that experience this morning if that might be useful.

To respond to some of the questions indicated for discussion today I would like to briefly comment as follows:

- It makes sense to build on the work of the Previous Citizens Dialogues. They provided rich feedback which is still valid today

- I think as many citizens as possible should be encouraged to participate. One of the advantages of doing the consultation online is that the physical limits on meeting spaces no longer apply. Many webinars now host well over a thousand attendees in different locations.
- In my view, we need to reverse past experiences where decisions are prepared in long meetings of official representatives and experts and the outcome is then put to people who are asked to endorse it. This time the EU should try hard to reach its citizens and to listen to them. So, ideally, the output of the Conference should be clear guidance to decision makers on what the citizens of the EU see as priorities for future EU action, where they do NOT want to see the EU involved and an indication of where citizens are open to change/willing to change the status quo in order to get the EU to where they want it to be.
- To try to deliver useful results the Conference needs both a pan EU dimension and a way of reflecting national differences. For the pan EU part, a list of topics for discussion across all Member States could be agreed at EU level (France and Germany have suggested their list) and then each country could add additional points to reflect its particular take on the EU. The exact format of the debate should be left to each Member State to decide. Here in Ireland we have been developing Citizens' Assemblies as a way of testing the views of our citizens while in other countries they do things differently. To give a valid reflection it will be important to allow room for national customs and practices.
- I feel strongly that the debate should be guided by substance and that processes and procedures should take a back seat. Treaty change is an instrument to enable the EU to act in certain areas but in my view we first need to hear what more - or less - citizens want the EU to do. Then to check and see if these things can be done within the existing Treaties and if not, only then should Treaty change be considered. I say this because I think any focus on Treaty change from the start would give a bureaucratic impression of the purpose of the Conference and would inevitably be seen as a project of the Brussels elites. Moreover I think it would be difficult to get Treaty change ratified in all 27 Member States in any realistic time frame, given changes of government and the tendency to

see referenda as judgements on the Government of the day rather than on the issues that underpin them.

- National parliaments could play their role through national and regional engagement, providing information on various EU topics as they are best placed to put EU policies in the national context. Once the national debate has concluded they could again help to explain the views of their fellow citizens to other Member States and the EU Institutions.
- In my view citizens' recommendations could be decided by simple majority voting during the national debates. Once the recommendations of citizens have been gathered they could be presented in a report to the Steering Group of the Conference. Governments and national parliaments should have the opportunity in parallel to indicate which recommendations they support and to explain why they do not support others. In the end the outcome of the process will be decided by the Council and European Parliament but the citizens' input should have a strong influence on the future direction of policy.
- I would hope that the planned Conference would help to spark a new debate about the EU and bring more citizen buy-in and support for future developments. If, in the end, the outcome is a set of recommendations that require Treaty change, then we know we will have a referendum here. That in itself should be a strong motive for Ireland to invest in the process and to ensure that our population will be ready to engage fully in whatever next steps the EU will decide to take.