

Joint Committee on EU Affairs, 25 November 2020

Conference on the Future of Europe – Opening Statement by Minister of State for European Affairs, Thomas Byrne, T.D.

A Chathaoirligh agus a Chomhaltaí,

Táim an-sásta teacht os comhair an Choiste ar maidin agus an Chomhdháil ar Thodhchaí na hEorpa atá molta a phlé libh.

Cuirim fáilte roimh suim an Choiste san ábhar seo agus roimh na seisiúin fhaisnéiseacha a bhí agaibh níos luaithe an mhí seo. Creidim go mbeadh agus go mbeidh ionchur tábhachtach ag Parlaimintí náistiúnta ar fud an Aontais Eorpaigh leis an bpróiseas nuair a sheolfar é.

Táim cinnte go bhfuil a fhios ag an gcuid is mó agaibh gur tháinig an togra don Chomhdháil ar dtús ó Uachtarán na Fraince, Emmanuel Macron, in alt nuachtáin a scríobh sé in earrach na bliana seo caite.

Ghlac an Coimisiún Eorpach leis ina dhiaidh sin mar thionscnamh chun na páirtithe leasmhara agus gnáthshaoránaigh, ach go háraithe, a thabhairt isteach. Go deimhin, bhí sé mar cheann de na gnéithe lárnacha d’Uachtarán Ursula von der Leyen i gclár oibre a Coimisiún nuair a chuaigh said i mbun oifige ag deireadh na bliana seo caite.

Tacaíonn Éire leis an togra, ach bhíomar comhsheasmhach freisin ag éileamh go gcaithfidh sé a bheith ábhartha ionas go mbeadh brí ag baint leis. Ní féidir leis an gComhdháil a bheith ina comhrá i measc na mionlach polaitiúla.

Ní hé seo an áit le machnamh a dhéanamh ar an bpaindéim COVID-19 agus ar na torthaí tubaisteacha a bhí aici ar an oiread sin gnáthdhaoine agus ar a slíte beatha, ní hamháin san

Eoraip ach ar fud an domhain. Is léir, áfach, agus muid ag súil go dtosóimid ag bogadh i dtreo téarnaimh gheilleagraigh láidir a chruthú, go mbeidh ról an Aontais Eorpaigh chun tosaigh agus lárnach. Tá cás laidir le déanamh don Chomhdháil a bheith mar bhealach chun gnáthshaoránaigh a mhealladh maidir leis an gcineál Eorpa a theastaíonn uainn a fheiceáil ag teacht slán as an ngéarchéim seo.

Mar sin, ní mór don Chomhdháil díriú ar na rudaí atá is tábhachtaí do ghnáthshaoránaigh:

- Conas téarnamh geilleagrach a chinntiú agus rathúnas níos cothroime a chur chun cinn?
- Conas is féidir linn cinntiú go bhfuil an tAontas Eorpach in ann aghaidh a thabhairt ar dhúshláin an athraithe aeráide agus an digitithe?
- Conas is féidir leis an Aontas Eorpach na luachanna sin atá bunúsach dúinn uilig a chur chun cinn i mbealach níos fearr, ar nós an smachta reachta agus cearta daonna a chosaint?
- Conas is féidir linn mórtionchar domhanda an Aontais Eorpaigh a chur chun cinn?

Ní hachmhainn don Aontas Eorpach chun bheith gafa le saincheistanna nach bhfuil chomh práinneach dár saoránaigh, ar nós ceistanna institiúideacha agus ceistanna maidir leis an gcothromaíocht laistigh de struchtúir an Aontais. Tá áthas orm a thuairisciú go bhfuil an dearcadh seo roinnte go forleathan i measc na mBallstát.

Creideann cuid a thacaíonn leis an gComhdháil go gcaithfidh gach saincheist, lena n-áirítear athrú féideartha ar na conarthaí, a bheith ar an mbord.

The Government does not favour treaty change as an objective of the Conference. We believe there is already sufficient scope for strengthening the Union within the existing Treaties, not least the Lisbon Treaty, which remains to be fully exploited. Our clear preference at this stage, therefore, is for a policy-led approach to the future work of the

Conference. Again, it is encouraging that this approach is the dominant one among our partners.

The original intention on the part of the Commission and President von der Leyne had been to launch the Conference on Europe Day this year, 9 May. Obviously, the pandemic has led to the necessary delay. Six months on, deliberations are still continuing between the Council and Parliament to finalise arrangements and a workplan for the Conference.

The Council, which agreed a common position on the Conference last June, has advocated a “policy first” approach which prioritises implementation of the EU Strategic Agenda. The Council has also been clear that the role and prerogatives of each of the Institutions must be respected, with full equality between them in how the Conference is organised. The Council is also keen that the ultimate outcome of the Conference should be a report to the European Council at some time during 2022. It has also been clear that the Conference does not fall within the scope of Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union concerning the amendment of the EU Treaties.

The Parliament, for its part, has stated that, in addition to consideration of the policy priorities set out in the Strategic Agenda, “democratic and institutional aspects of the EU” must also be addressed by the Conference. This is likely to cover such issues as the *spitzenkandidat* process and the question of transnational lists for European Parliament elections. The Parliament also wants an early cross-institutional commitment to implement the Conference’s recommendations, including through treaty change if necessary.

Notwithstanding these differing perspectives, the German Presidency has made good progress in securing broad agreement on a mandate and programme for the Conference. The main outstanding issue now relates to who should chair the Conference. On this issue, we have made clear we support the German Presidency and the Council in favouring an experienced, independent individual to take on this important role. Opinions are, however,

sharply divided between the Council and the Parliament on this issue and it may require reference to the European Council to secure final agreement.

Realistically, therefore, it is now likely to be early next year at the earliest before the initiative is formally launched. Once the programme and scope have been agreed between the Council and Parliament, Member States will be encouraged to start preparing individual national plans for engaging ordinary citizens and relevant stake-holders including, in our own case, this Committee and the Oireachtas, within the framework of the Conference.

In this regard, Ireland has an excellent trackrecord of active engagement with citizens on the issue of Europe on which we can build. We know from discussions with EU Partners that many have been impressed with the work of our Citizens' Assemblies and with the series of Citizens' Dialogues held during 2018-19 to input into the National Statement on Europe issued by the previous government in April of last year. We also have some excellent partner institutes here in Ireland with whom we have successfully collaborated in this area.

The difficulties presented by the pandemic will undoubtedly present challenges in organising the type of public consultations and town-hall meetings which were so well supported in the past. However, as recent months have shown, there are plenty of alternative means, through virtual platforms, to interact with each other. Indeed, on-line consultations may allow us to reach important target groups, and particularly among the younger population who arguably should be most engaged about the Future of Europe, in a manner which might be more effective than through traditional methods.

The structure of the engagement within each Member State cannot be finalised until final agreement is reached between the EU institutions and the vision of the Chair is outlined.

Mr. Chairman, Members,

The Government is also determined that the Oireachtas must be fully engaged in the work of the Conference since it is recognised across Europe that national parliaments have a key role to play in this regard, as the democratically-elected representatives of Europe's citizens. As Minister for European Affairs, I am very keen to hear your thoughts and views on how the Conference should operate and how this Committee and Oireachtas Members generally can most usefully input into its deliberations.

I would like to see today as the start of a dialogue which will continue in the coming weeks and months, as we prepare to launch the Conference hopefully early next year and plan for its conduct here in Ireland.

This is an important issue. The last months have hopefully only reinforced how central a role Europe plays in all our lives, as we work together to overcome the virus and lay the groundwork for a strong economic recovery.

I am sure that the Europe which will emerge from this crisis will be an even stronger and better Union, more firmly based on solidarity, partnership and common values. And it will be crucial in 2021 and the coming years to engage actively with our citizens and hear how exactly we can ensure this is the case.

Thank you. I am now happy to take any questions you may have.

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[Chairperson and Members,

I am very pleased to appear before the Committee this morning as it debates the Conference on the Future of Europe.

I welcome both the Committee's interest in this subject and the briefings it had earlier this month. I believe that national Parliaments all over Europe can, and will, have an important input into this process when it begins.

I am sure that most of you know that the proposal was put before the Conference by the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, in a newspaper article he wrote last spring.

The European Commission accepted it subsequently as an initiative to get interested parties, especially ordinary citizens, involved. Indeed, it was one of the key aspects of President Ursula von der Leyen's Commission agenda when she took office at the end of last year.

Ireland supports the proposal, but we have also been consistent in demanding that it be relevant in order to have meaning. The Conference cannot simply be a conversation amongst the political minority.

This is not the place in which to reflect upon the Covid-19 pandemic and on the disastrous effects it has had on so many ordinary people and their livelihoods, not just in Europe but all over the world. It is clear, however, as we look forward to moving towards creating a strong economic recovery, that the European Union shall have a key and leading role. There is a strong case to be made for the Conference to be a method of drawing citizens towards the kind of Europe we want to see coming out of this crisis.

Therefore, the Conference must focus on the things most important to ordinary citizens:

- How can we guarantee an economic recovery and promote a fairer kind of prosperity?*
- How can we guarantee that the European Union will be able to face the challenges of climate change and digitization?*
- How can the European Union better promote those values which are paramount for all of us, such as the rule of law and the protection of human rights?*
- How can we promote the greater global influence of the European Union?*

The European Union cannot afford to get wrapped up in issues which are not pressing for our citizens, such as institutional questions and matters concerning balance within the Union's structures. I am happy to report that this viewpoint is widely-shared amongst the Member States.

Some of those who support the Conference believe that every issue, including possible changes to the Treaties, must be on the table.]

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