

A Chathaoirligh agus a Chomhaltaí,

Táim an-sásta teacht os comhair an Choiste ar maidin agus an Chomhdháil ar Thodhchaí na hEorpa agus obair na Comhairle Gnóthaí Ginearálta a phlé libh.

As the Committee will be aware, the formal proceedings of Conference on the Future of Europe concluded last May with a closing Europe Day session in Strasbourg at which the final report of the Conference was adopted. I believe the Irish contribution to the Conference over the course of its year-long proceedings was a significant and influential one and I would particularly like to express my thanks to those fellow members of the Oireachtas who participated as Conference Plenary members, including Deputies Richmond and Ó Murchú.

The final Conference report set out 49 proposals for consideration, based on over 320 interesting and innovative measures and recommendations debated during the Conference and spanning virtually the entire spectrum of EU activity. EU Leaders briefly discussed the results of the Conference at the June European Council, noting the proposals and recommendations and requesting each Institution to follow up in accordance with its own competences.

Since the final report was published, both the Council and the Commission have published assessments on the proposals and have expressed the view that the vast majority of the proposals can be implemented if agreed through existing policies without the need to re-open the European Treaties.

Arising from its assessment, the European Commission intend implementing some of the recommendations within the framework of the Commission Work Programme for 2023 and President von der Leyen outlined the Commission's intentions in her State of the Union address to the European Parliament last month. A number of Commission proposals for the year ahead stem directly

from Conference recommendations. These include, for example, a new initiative on mental health, revision of animal welfare legislation, a legislative proposal for a European Disability Card and a Raw Materials Act amongst others. President von der Leyen also outlined Commission plans to make greater use of citizens' panels in the legislative process, primarily as a sounding board for future proposals.

The European Parliament, for its part, also adopted a Resolution last June calling for the convening of a Convention in order to follow up on Conference recommendations and proposing a number of treaty amendments, primarily in relation to providing for greater use of QMV in decision-making. On the basis of advice provided by the Council Legal Services, a further resolution will require to be adopted by the European Parliament formally setting out any precise amendments being proposed to the Treaties and which have been formally adopted and approved by the Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee.

The Council, for its own part, has now begun its assessment of the Conference proposals and recommendations, with an initial discussion at the Informal GAC in Prague in July and again at last month's General Affairs Council. For the moment, most Council members concur with our own analysis that the EU's immediate focus should centre on progressing those proposals, constituting approximately 95% of the Conference recommendations, which can be realised within the parameters of the existing treaty framework.

Discussion has also begun within the Council on some of the more difficult recommendations arising from the Conference process, including in the area of voting and decision-making, while the Czech Presidency have also been canvassing views on whether there is support within the Council for the convening of a Convention to initiate a process of Treaty Change.

Addressing this latter issue first, Committee members will be aware that President von der Leyen, in her State of the Union address, lent the Commission's support to the calls for a Convention. Nationally, the Taoiseach when addressing the European Parliament in June, made clear that the Government remains open to the possibility of Treaty change if this proves necessary but for the moment believes, like most others in the Council, that the initial emphasis should be on implementing the vast majority of Conference recommendations which can be done so within the existing treaty framework.

In relation to the call for greater use of QMV, this is an issue which already commanded much attention during Conference proceedings as it is clearly highly relevant in terms of any consideration of how to improve both the effectiveness of EU decision-making and its standing as an international actor.

Some Member States have already indicated that they are open to the possibility of making greater use of QMV, particularly in relation to areas such as CFSP. From discussions to date within the Council, the majority of Member States, and particularly smaller Member States, would be more cautious about any proposal to make greater use of QMV.

Nationally, a cross-government exercise overseen by the Department of Foreign Affairs is now underway in which Government Departments are submitting their views on the numerous Conference proposals and recommendations relevant to their area. While our overall position on this issue still remains to be formalised, I think it is fair to say that there would be some considerable hesitancy about any greater use of QMV, particularly in areas such as the CFSP or in relation to taxation issues.

The possibility for greater use of QMV is one which already exists within the Treaties, in the form of a quite extensive series of passerelle clauses already provided for. It is likely that much of the focus in Council discussions in the

coming months will centre on these passerelle clauses and whether there might be willingness to make greater use of these provisions which could be done within the existing Treaty framework.

Turning to the work of the General Affairs Council, which I know Members take an interest in, I represented Ireland at a meeting of the General Affairs Council (GAC) on 20 September last. Our main item of discussion was preparation for the European Council meeting on 20-21 October where the focus will be very much on the immediate challenges of Ukraine, energy and the overall economic situation.

We also received updates from the Czech Presidency on their priorities for their Presidency and from Commission Vice-President Šefčovič on the current state of EU-UK relations which I will be happy to address separately at this meeting. We also discussed the 2022 Strategic Foresight Report and the Commission's Letter of Intent which will help the preparation of the 2023 Commission Work Programme. Finally, the Council held its annual and important horizontal discussion on rule of law focussing on judicial independence and media pluralism.

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