

Ireland and the European Union at 50: how do we maintain influence in the institutions when the number of Irish nationals within these institutions is falling precipitously?

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Honourable Members,

Thank you for the invitation to address the Committee on this crucial matter. It is a very appropriate juncture in which to consider these issues given the proximity to the fiftieth anniversary of Irish accession to the European Union on 1 January 2023. Ireland should feel justifiably proud of the contribution its nationals have made within the EU institutions over the last half century. Familiar names such as Pat Cox, Catherine Day, Paschal Donohoe, Emily O' Reilly, David O' Sullivan, and Peter Sutherland have all served with great distinction at either the administrative or political level. But away from the limelight, Irish officials at different levels have also distinguished themselves as hard working, trustworthy and respected professionals. In the process they have also helped the country punch above its weight in Brussels and EU capitals.

By now we are all aware of the key issue: **Ireland faces a collapse in the number of our nationals working in the EU institutions**, unprecedented in scale during our 50 years of EU membership. This is based on a two-pronged problem: the retirement of senior officials is reaching 'cliff-edge' proportions, with more than a third of officials expected to retire by 2025, while we have simply failed to keep up with recruitment of younger Irish people over the past decade or more. Since 2015, only 22 Irish nationals have passed the EU's '*concours*' examination, far below the 69 officials who are due to depart before 2025. While the reasons for this are not straightforward, everybody accepts that it is a problem for Ireland

and how we conduct business and defend our national interests in different EU spaces in Brussels.

THE 2021 'A CAREER FOR EU' STRATEGY

The Government's decision in 2021 to pursue a new strategy, '**A Career for EU**', for recruiting Irish nationals to the EU institutions was a welcome one. There are **many positive elements** included in the strategy. I welcome, for example, the prospective expansion of the Third Level-focused EU Jobs campaign and the intention to also promote EU careers in Ireland's secondary schools. The increase in the number of nationally seconded experts to the EU institutions is also welcome, as is the mooted 'EU Stream' to be introduced in the civil service. The inclusion of Northern Ireland academic institutions as key partners is also very welcome. The 'Shared Island' research platform is up and running and there is more cooperation and collaboration going on between academic institutions in Northern Ireland and the Republic than ever before. There is no reason to think that promotion of the EU strategy in Northern Ireland will not help the overall cause of boosting Irish numbers in Brussels.

For all of those positives, there **are concerns about the strategy's effectiveness**. As an academic specialising in European integration in Ireland, I am part of a group of colleagues who teach (variously) EU law, EU economic integration, EU institutional governance, European languages and history to undergraduate and postgraduate students. We cooperate in particular through a body called **the Irish Association for Contemporary European Studies (IACES)**. This body was founded in the 1970s around the time of Irish accession to the EU and has been led by very distinguished individuals such as Senator Maurice Manning, Professor Brigid Laffan and Dr. Mary C. Murphy. I currently serve as Vice-President with a new President elected in 2021, Dr Giada Lagana of Cardiff University.

The number of EU-relevant offerings available within our universities increased over the last 50 years, in tandem with developments in the

integration process and a commitment from our universities to teach 'Europe' in a variety of different ways. In recent years, however, we have witnessed **a growing crisis in European Studies**. Although in some senses we can point to a 'mainstreaming' of European affairs across Arts and Humanities programmes, for example, the number of specific European Studies course offerings provided by Ireland's third level institutions has declined. For that reason the Department of Further and Higher Education needs to be included as a critical partner in the effort to properly support European Studies teaching in Ireland's universities.

The government's approach to recruitment up to now has been confined to **an annual 'roadshow' on EU careers** where the Minister for European Affairs and officials visit each university campus to talk to students about the potential careers available in Brussels and beyond. Despite good intentions, **this approach just has not impacted on students**. It is more of a singular event than a process and seems to have changed the dial very little in respect of identifying and advancing real candidates for EU posts.

A particular concern is that the **new strategy seems to privilege connecting with third level students via the careers offices of Irish universities rather than with the core academic faculty that teach European integration**, week in, week out. As economists, lawyers, language experts and political scientists, academic specialists are the people at the coalface of Ireland's universities that 'teach Europe.' **They are the people who get to know students and mentor them throughout their undergraduate and/or postgraduate careers**. They are the people best placed to 'turn students on' to the idea of making a career in the EU institutions, to direct them toward the European Movement's 'Blue Book' platform and to opportunities to pursue Masters Degrees of great relevance to achieving success in the EU recruitment process. Therefore it is imperative that the government engages with the academics engaged in teaching Europe as key partners in this effort to enhance the mainstreaming of

‘Europe’ in our schools and universities. I know many academics who would be only too glad to help identify students of real potential and mentor them throughout their studies with a view to preparing them for the *Concours* process.

One other aspect of the ‘A Career for EU’ strategy is worth mentioning. The government is now going to sponsor annual sponsorships for highly talented postgraduate students to attend the **College of Europe in Bruges**. This institution is a very fine one and often viewed as a kind of ‘finishing school’ for EU functionaries. Certainly, a large number of Bruges graduates from across the EU succeed in the *Concours* and make excellent careers for themselves within the institutions.

But I would argue that, as helpful as this might be to Ireland, **the preparation of good candidates for the *Concours* should not just be confined to the College of Europe**. There is no lack of willingness amongst colleagues at Irish universities, if the Government wishes to engage us to develop more postgraduate courses which would help students achieve the specialist qualifications necessary to succeed in the recruitment process. It is vital this engagement takes place via specialist academic bodies such as IACES, rather than university careers offices whose work is very broad and where, very often, there is little knowledge of how the EU works.

The University of Limerick was the first Irish higher education institution to offer courses on ‘Europe’ in the early 1970s. Since then teaching on and about Europe has broadened and deepened considerably, even allowing for recent retrenchment. Why the College of Europe and not, for example, UCD’s excellent MSc in European Governance? Why not UCC’s well-established MSc in International Public Policy and Diplomacy, or UL’s European Politics and Governance? It seems extraordinary to me that Irish academics specialising in European integration, with tens of decades of work on European Union matters, do not seem to figure significantly in the

Department's strategy to address the problem of recruitment. One positive thing the government could do would be to sponsor specific **annual scholarships for four or five of the key MA/Msc programmes** which engage seriously with European integration on offer in Irish universities. That would help Irish students who excel at undergraduate level to continue their studies to a significant specialist level in Ireland and prepare for the competitive EU application process.

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The Strategy mentions an intention to more vigorously promote EU careers in Ireland's secondary schools. This is very welcome. But again **the interface mentioned here is school guidance counsellors. This seems entirely inappropriate to me.** Within Ireland's second level education system, we now have an excellent course called ***Politics and Society at Leaving Certificate Level***, in addition to and building on the work students do in ***Civic, Social and Political Education*** for Junior Certificate. 'Europe' has been very carefully threaded into the *Politics and Society* Course and we are seeing increasing cooperation between these schools and Irish universities. Indeed, along with other colleagues I have provided advice to secondary school teachers about how to 'teach Europe' within the curriculum and I remain in contact with many teachers as they build the EU dimension of their teaching.

Thus there is some dismay as to why the strategy suggests guidance counsellors as the key interlocutors with secondary students. They are not. The focus should be overwhelmingly on the teachers who teach students 'Europe', especially in senior cycle. The strategy should engage seriously with the representative body of teachers – the Politics and Society Teachers Association of Ireland (PSTAI) who teach the Politics and Society course at Leaving Certificate level. It would also be useful to schools to facilitate much more regular visits by TDs and Senators specifically to talk about European issues that impact on and concern our secondary school students.

OUR APPROACH TO LANGUAGE LEARNING

One of the long-standing weaknesses in Ireland's approach to recruitment to the EU institutions has been **a neglect of foreign languages** and an inability to provide our second and third level students with the language skills they need to really succeed in the world. **Ireland simply has not taken language learning seriously enough** in a world where the mobility of high-skilled individuals revolves to some degree on their ability to conduct business across different language platforms and spaces.

The approach taken to language learning within the existing 'A Career for EU Strategy' seems to favour the 'quick fix' route of providing potential EU *Concours* candidates with help from the PPLI unit of the Department of Education and the similarly located *Languages Connect* strategy. While these elements, in addition to some intensive language preparation in advance of the *Concours*, may help some Irish candidates get 'across the line', they do not represent a viable approach going forward. We need to significantly enhance and properly resource the teaching of languages from primary school onwards.

Thus while the commitment to double the number of language assistants employed in Irish schools is welcome, the government needs to invest appropriately at all levels of education, to improve the take-up of language learning and overall competence of our graduating students. There is also some concern that Irish graduates coming out of our third level institutions with ostensible competences in specific languages actually fall significantly below the threshold of ability applied at EU level. There needs to be more engagement with third level institutions on the actual capacities of their graduates to function effectively in the real world and more supports provided to universities to improve their capacity to deploy resources effectively.

PROPOSALS

There are a number of concrete proposals which I would like to put forward to the Committee to improve Ireland's capacity to recruit Irish nationals to the EU institutions.

First, I suggest that the government develops **a database of all academics in Ireland working on EU related themes**. From that database, academics could be chosen to specifically mentor the most promising third level students working on and interested in EU affairs, with a view to directing them toward applying for EU positions in the future. Academics constitute potentially the most valuable interface between the government and the high-calibre Irish students who I believe have the potential to be recruited to serve in the European Commission and other key EU institutions and agencies.

Second, these academics might usefully help identify and mobilise the highest achieving students from key disciplines such as European Studies, Politics and International Relations, Languages, History, Economics and Law across the Irish university sector (including institutions in Northern Ireland) and bring them together twice per year at **a EU Workshop** with the Minister for European Affairs and his/her colleagues, to participate in a range of activities, including specialist talks on the EU and a EU Negotiation simulation game, designed to deepen significantly their engagement with the European Union. It would also be really worthwhile to have members of the European Affairs Committee engaged in this process, sharing valuable knowledge with students about Ireland's EU interests and evolving policy positions.

Each university would be asked to identify three or four of their best students, including those who may have already demonstrated a significant aptitude for and/or interest in EU affairs. Those students would then be invited to a one and a half day event in Dublin, organised by the Department of Foreign Affairs (I suggest an

October date in the calendar), which would include seminars in European Integration delivered by world class academics, an EU Negotiation simulation game, as well as a more advanced introduction to the idea of 'Working in Brussels'. The whole purpose of such a gathering would be to build on the academic work going on in the universities and help immerse this high talent pool much more deeply in European integration, meet politicians and civil servants involved 'at the coalface' of such work with a view to directing these students forward toward Europe as a career.

The third element of this approach would build on this kind of gathering by following it with **an immersive one week field trip to Brussels** (approximately, March in the annual calendar) which would include expert lectures on different aspects of EU activity and visits to key institutional sites, including the European Commission, European Parliament, European External Action Service, Committee of the Regions, Irish Permanent Representation, Northern Ireland Executive Office, United Nations, Ibec, and other offices of relevance to Ireland.

Students would also get to meet Irish MEPs and officials from the Irish Perm Rep to discuss their work and visit actual meetings of some parliamentary committees. The trip would also include a half day 'Model EU' negotiation at the Parliamentarium attached to the European Parliament, where students could engage in an extraordinarily well thought out simulation of an actual EU negotiation. Many of us have been taking our students to the Parliamentarium for such simulation games over many years and they really do seem to inspire students significantly.

Such a study trip might begin with **a full day visit to the battle fields of World War One, with a special emphasis on Irish sites of interest such as the Irish Peace Park at Messines**, opened jointly by President McAlesse and Queen Elizabeth in 1998. There is a lot of empirical as well as anecdotal research to suggest that such field

trips really have the effect of ‘turning students on’ to the idea of Europe and, as importantly, to imagining themselves working within the institutions. ‘Europe’ thus ceases to be abstract and actually takes on concrete meaning in the mental landscapes of students as somewhere they might locate themselves and make a meaningful contribution to.

I would also suggest that the Committee should urge the government **to support a new Brussels field trip fund specifically for secondary schools**. This should provide resources for EU activity, including a significant subsidy to support sending transition year students to Brussels for a one week fieldtrip. This fund could also support workshops on different aspects of European Union activity particularly relevant to secondary school students in locations close to home in Ireland. If we estimate a subsidy of about €500 Euros per student (to cover transport and accommodation costs) and an average class of about 30, a subsidy of approximately €15,000 per school per year might be provided. The added value here is not just about identifying and mentoring the high-performing undergraduates identified above at third level. It is about starting earlier – at second level – and **creating a genuine European career path** for many more of our students. This in turn has the potential to deliver the functional benefit of providing more candidates for the Concours in the years to come. But even absent the recruitment function, it has the potential to provide talented Irish students with a real commitment to the EU which they might usefully carry into business, teaching, journalism, and any number of professions. The ‘soft power’ that potentially accrues to Ireland from this is almost incalculable.

At a practical level, by adopting such an approach, we could actively mentor students right through from secondary school to university undergraduate programme onwards, and allow them to participate in these dedicated events, as well as others organised by European Movement Ireland (EMI), the Irish Institute for International and

European Affairs (IIEA, especially its Young Professionals Network), and by the Department of Foreign Affairs. Europe, in other words, could be part of these students' lives from relatively early on in their second level education, right through to advanced postgraduate experiences. Academics could also integrate these 'elite' students into the research activities conducted by the EU-linked research units within our universities (including in the world-class Horizon 2020 framework and other programmes) from the earliest stage of their engagement with us.

Fourth, while it is very welcome to see the government support the creation of new postgraduate scholarships at the College of Europe, I would also **encourage the provision of scholarships for the key Irish postgraduate courses on Europe** (outlined earlier) which would allow a cohort of students to gain advanced knowledge of and skills relevant to working in Brussels. At an earlier point in time (the 1990s and 2000s in particular) Irish universities hosted a significant number of postgraduates from Central and Eastern Europe (with scholarships provided by the Irish government). A disproportionately large number of these individuals have gone on to achieve very high status within their own countries as ambassadors, members of parliament, ministers and distinguished civil servants. There is no reason we cannot now provide resources for Irish students to progress their specialist studies within Irish universities to achieve a similar effect.

'IRISH-ONLY' AND 'SPECIALIST-ONLY' RECRUITMENT PROCESSES?

The government has recently proposed to Brussels that the problem of recruitment be addressed by an 'Irish-only' recruitment process. This would happen if the representation of member state nationals in the institutions falls below a specific floor of representation.

Ireland is not alone in confronting this problem: while recruitment of nationals of Central and Eastern European member states has been maintained at an appropriate level, it has fallen back in some older (and wealthier) member states. There does seem to be an increasing correlation between the relative wealth of the member state and the

capacity of that state to recruit their nationals to an effective or proportionate level. The European Parliament is already doing preliminary work in this area. It is important to remember that there are good reasons why the EU maintained a universal method of appointments over the years: it is highly meritocratic and ensures the appointment of very high calibre officials.

But the world is changing and Ireland should take advantage of every opportunity presented to advance the number of our nationals represented in the EU institutions. We have a very distinguished record of service at a high level within the European Union. As importantly, the Irish people who have served at mid and lower levels have both helped advance Irish interests and also helped us make friends across the 27 member states of the Union. 'Soft Power' is a very real phenomenon and one that is actively helped by having as many Irish nationals as possible working within the EU institutions.

There are also proposals circulating in Brussels to further modify the Concours in the direction of **a specialist recruitment process**. This would also be more favourable to Irish graduates in that it would privilege the holding of sector/policy specific qualifications over the language criterion. If this does get approval it should mean that highly qualified Irish graduates who might be somewhat challenged by the language criterion would have another route into the EU institutions.

To conclude, while the 'A Career for EU' strategy for recruitment is certainly a step in the right direction, there is still much more that could be done to 'turn young people on' to the idea of working in Europe. Given the extraordinary challenges Ireland and other member states now face and the role the EU plays in managing these crises, we should do everything possible to facilitate and help the recruitment of Irish nationals to EU institutions in the years to come. We know that investing in our people pays off. We should begin in

the school system and follow through in mentoring students on a 'European path' through to undergraduate and postgraduate education, as part of an expanded effort to more effectively 'communicate Europe' to the Irish public.