Joint Committee on EU Affairs, 8 February 2023
Fiftieth Anniversary of Ireland's Accession to the European Communities
Opening Statement by Rory Montgomery

Chairman, members of the Joint Committee,

I am delighted to have this opportunity to share some personal reflections on Ireland's membership of the European Union. Over half of my thirty-six years as an Irish official were spent on EU business, including at a senior level as Permanent Representative in Brussels from 2009 to 2013 and as Second Secretary General at the Departments of the Taoiseach and Foreign Affairs from 2014 until my retirement in 2019. I was heavily involved in the EU Presidencies of 2004 and 2013, in the latter as chairman of Coreper and head of a 180-strong team in Brussels.

Issues in which I was involved included the negotiation of the Nice and Lisbon Treaties, and the referendums on them; the financial and eurozone crises and the Irish bailout; the EU's foreign policy, in particular on the Middle East and on Russia; the migration crisis; and Brexit.

I would be happy to answer questions on any of these subjects, or indeed on any other topic. However, I thought it might be more helpful to offer some very brief and by no means exhaustive thoughts on the how, rather than the what, of Irish engagement with the EU. Be aware that I am painting with a very broad brush and that some of what I say may well be out of date.

First, engagement is, and must be, a whole of government effort. To a greater or lesser extent, every Department has an EU role. Virtually every one of them has at least one official seconded to the Permanent Representation. Brussels tends to operate in a whole series of distinct institutional circles, but some important issues do involve overlaps and competing objectives. This makes proper co-ordination essential. While this has been strengthened over the past number of years under the Departments of the

Taoiseach and of Foreign Affairs, our system, whether at political or official level, is still relatively loose and informal. This has its strengths – we can be agile and flexible – but also its weaknesses in terms of coherence and consistency. As a former colleague used to say, we are a very good cup team, but not always so good in the league.

Second, it is essential that officials all along the chain have a strong knowledge of the issues, to enable them to assess our interests and formulate clear and realistic policies. This is often but not always the case. The overall quality of the Irish civil servants working on EU issues is high. I used to think, however, that the focus of some colleagues could be quite narrow. Technical expertise is essential, but a broader awareness of the policy and political background, both in Brussels and in other member states, is also valuable. My experience was that many Departments' international and EU sections were understaffed and not in a position to acquire that kind of knowledge or to analyse issues as deeply as some of their counterparts. To increase the pool of expertise, increasing the number of secondments from Departments to the EU institutions has been a priority over recent years. It is at least as important as the permanent employment of Irish citizens in the institutions.

Third, the quality of Taoisigh and Ministers matters. It is they who make the big calls; interact with their opposite numbers, entirely on their own for the Taoiseach at European Councils; set standards and objectives for their officials; and communicate with the public. I don't dare to comment on the individual performances of my former masters, but in general I think we have been well served.

Fourth, a small Member State has to prioritise, and to pick and choose its battles. We have always been good at identifying and negotiating on absolutely key issues – usually from a defensive angle, whether in regard to tax, agriculture, or security and defence. We could, however, do more to help set the agenda on other important questions, as we have done on the development of the Single Market. At the same time, we need to be realistic about the limits of our influence. Intervening on

everything is not productive and does not win you friends. And the great majority of areas are subject to qualified majority voting – while it favours small member states in relative terms, our power is inevitably much less than those of the large. We have to husband it.

Fifth, building and nurturing relationships is key, whether with the EU institutions, not just the Commission but increasingly the Parliament, with other member states, or at times with the media – as I found during the Eurozone crisis. This requires a considerable investment of time and energy on the part of politicians and officials, which is not helped by our geographical position and the domestic demands on Ministers. And some of this effort can be wasted, in particular given the inevitable turnover of Member State governments and Ministers. I used to be struck by how rapidly a Minister in office for two or three years would move up the seniority ladder among their peers. But it is work which has to be done. We are by a long way the smallest country to maintain Embassies in all Member States. I am not wholly convinced that this is necessary, but it is certainly of some benefit. At least as important has been the recent building up of our teams in the most important Member States, France and Germany. The development of a strategy of more structured networking with other Member States, in particular like-minded ones, has also been a focus. Brexit has given this a strong push. At one level it happens in and between capitals, but on the detail of legislation co-operation in Brussels is vital. Incidentally, it goes without saying that the departure of the UK has weakened our negotiating position in some key areas, such as trade, financial services, and justice and home affairs.

People tend to like the Irish, I always found. A warning, though: friendly relations and mutual understanding go only so far. I would quote the 19th century British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston: "We have no perpetual allies…our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow." The same is true of every member state.

Finally, on EU Presidencies. As I said, I was actively involved in two, including at the very centre in 2013. This was the most physically and mentally demanding job of my career and I have tremendous memories of that time. However, I think at times the significance of the Presidency can be exaggerated and misunderstood. In no real way are you setting or shaping the EU agenda, all the more so since with the Lisbon Treaty the Presidency no longer chairs the European Council or the Foreign Affairs Council. Nor are you in a position to pursue national interests - quite the reverse, unless sometimes at the margins. Rather, the Presidency is the engineer who tries to ensure that the EU machinery continues to deliver good outcomes as effectively and quickly as is possible. It does so through chairing the great majority of meetings, deciding on the agenda for each and drawing conclusions from debate. Another ever more important role is negotiating with the Parliament on behalf of the Council to reach agreement on legislative and financial proposals. These tasks require preparation, skill, and determination and judgement. All the best Presidencies allow their teams in Brussels to lead day-to-day, with Ministers often delivering deals at the end of the process. But it often happens that circumstances, and the different interests of Member States, can thwart you despite trying your best.

I think that all seven Irish Presidencies would be deemed to have performed to a very high standard. That in 2013 helped to re-establish our credentials as we emerged from a very difficult period. I have no doubt that the 2026 Presidency, under the leadership of the recently nominated Permanent Representative, Aingeal O'Donoghue, and Deputy Permanent Representative, Barbara Cullinane, will maintain the unbroken sequence.

Thank you for your attention.