

**Minister of State for European Affairs and Defence, Peter Burke, TD**

**Joint Committee on European Union Affairs**

**8 March 2023**

### **Opening Remarks**

A Chathaoirligh agus a Chomhaltaí,

I am very happy to appear before this Committee for the first time as Minister of State for European Affairs and Defence this morning. I look forward to discussing issues arising from the General Affairs Council with you. The importance of EU engagement is particularly clear in this year of EU50 celebrations. The last five decades since have witnessed Ireland's emergence as a modern, open economy and society – shaped by close reciprocal cooperation with our European partners.

The **EU50 programme** began on 22 January 2022 marking the anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Accession. The programme has seen visits by both the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, to Ireland with each addressing special joint sittings of the Houses of the Oireachtas. The programme will conclude in May with a significant marking of Europe Day/Week. As Minister for European Affairs, I am particularly looking forward to the schools outreach programme that will build on last year's successful programme and which will again see Cabinet Ministers paired with EU Ambassadors visiting schools throughout the country.

As the Committee will be aware, last week Commission President von der Leyen and Prime Minister Sunak announced that agreement in principle has been reached on the '**Windsor Framework**'.

I have joined the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste in welcoming this new way forward on the Protocol which comprehensively addresses the real-life concerns raised. Working constructively together, the EU and the UK have navigated complex issues to reach sustainable joint solutions which offer stability and predictability for Northern Ireland.

This framework is foremost about the people and businesses of Northern Ireland. Goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland that will stay or be consumed in Northern Ireland will be subject to significantly simplified procedures. And it gives Northern Ireland's representatives and stakeholders a greater say in how arrangements will apply in Northern Ireland.

I believe that consensus on the Windsor Framework marks the beginning of a new phase across the breadth of the EU-UK relationship, allowing us to forge a stronger partnership as we address shared global challenges.

Turning now to other priorities on the EU agenda, I attended the two most recent meetings of the **General Affairs Councils** in Brussels on 6 and 21 February 2023. These were, of course, the first two occasions on which I attended the Council in my new role and it provided a useful opportunity to meet with my colleagues and fellow EU Affairs Ministers.

At the 6<sup>th</sup> February Council, in addition to the main Council meetings, I had a series of introductory bilateral meetings with my Austrian, Slovakian and Finnish colleagues while at the GAC on 21 February, I met with my Portuguese and Slovenian counterparts.

The main focus of discussion and work at both February Councils was preparation for both the special European Council on 9 February and the regular March European Council which will take place on 23-24 March.

The principal items of discussion at the special European Council on 9 February were Ukraine, Competitiveness and the EU Economy, and Migration. President Zelenskyy, of course, attended the special European Council in person, having participated virtually in previous European Councils since the launch of Russia's war of aggression in February of last year.

Ukraine, the Economy and Migration are again likely to figure heavily in discussions at the forthcoming March European Council. In relation to the Economy and Competitiveness, a series of communications and proposals are awaited from the Commission relating to the Single Market, the internal energy market and the proposed Net Zero Industry Act.

These communications and proposals will be of great importance in framing the overall discussion for Leaders. Ireland has consistently emphasised the importance of safeguarding and completing the Single Market, particularly in relation to the provision of services, as a key measure in promoting EU competitiveness.

Similarly, the importance of maintaining a level playing field and limiting any proposed greater flexibility in the application of State Aid rules is a priority for us in fashioning any EU response to developments such as the Inflation Reduction Act in the US.

Migration remains firmly at the top of the EU agenda at present, not least due to such tragic incidents as that which occurred last week in Italy when over sixty people lost their lives, including very young children, seeking to cross the Mediterranean.

This tragedy again underlines the need for a comprehensive EU response, based on solidarity and responsibility, aimed at devising a fit-for-purpose asylum and migration system which can deal humanely and in full accordance with international law with the very considerable migratory pressures now existing on frontline and indeed most Member States, including Ireland.

The Swedish Presidency is prioritising progress in negotiations on the EU's proposed Asylum and Migration Pact proposals and Ireland will continue to offer its full and constructive support to them in that regard.

The General Affairs Council was also updated by Commission Vice President Maroš Šefcovič on EU-UK Relations at its 6 February meeting.

Finally, before concluding, I should note that both General Affairs Councils in February received updates from the Commission on the EU response to the appalling earthquake which took place in Türkiye and Syria on 6 February and which claimed so many thousands of lives. Ireland, as you know, has been very

much part of this collective EU response, providing some €10 million in humanitarian assistance as well as our largest ever deployment of emergency stocks under the Irish Aid Rapid Response Initiative. Also, in the margins of the February GAC, VP Seftovic chaired a discussion on Strategic Foresight.

I will be happy to address all these and other issues now in more detail with Committee Members and look forward to your questions.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.