

Review of Workplace Arrangements in Iveagh House on 17 June 2020

Minister Simon Coveney

Opening statement for the JCFAD

Good afternoon Chair and members of the Committee, and thank you for this opportunity to speak with you.

On the 17 June 2020, Ireland was elected to a seat on the UN Security Council. This was a massive achievement. It was the successful culmination of a 15-year effort, and of an intense two-year global campaign by Ministers and Irish officials, showcasing Irish values of empathy, partnership and independence, and convincing members of the UN that Ireland would be a voice for good on international peace and security issues, representing the perspectives of smaller states.

On the 17 of June, as planned and approved in advance, a team of officials were carrying out essential duties in the workplace in Iveagh House, ahead of an announcement of the first round election voting that evening. These officials were ready to work through the night to conduct a full campaign in 17 hours ahead of a possible second round of voting scheduled to begin on the morning of 18 June in New York, to secure this seat for Ireland.

On that evening there was a breach of social distancing guidance that has caused genuine and understandable concern to members of this Committee and to the Irish public. This involved the publication of a photograph from the

offices of Iveagh House showing some of that very same dedicated team I spoke of just now.

In response to the concerns expressed, and to establish the facts of the matter, on 13 January last I asked the Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Joe Hackett, with me here this afternoon, for a report by the end of January into the circumstances leading up to this workplace incident. I received the Report of the Review of Workplace Arrangements in Iveagh House on 17 June 2020 on 31 January, which I sent to the Committee and which was also published that day. The Secretary General, Joe Hackett, is here today to outline for you the contents of the Report and its findings.

For my own part, I am satisfied that the Review, drawing on extensive oral and written evidence as set out in the Report, provides a fair, balanced and, where appropriate, critical account of the events on 17 June 2020. I support the conclusions of the Review, as well as the actions taken by the Secretary General in response. The Secretary General, on behalf of the Department, has clearly acknowledged that there were valid public concerns raised by this photograph, that a mistake was made, and a sincere apology given.

I would now like to take this opportunity to provide an account of my own movements over the course of that day, as far as I can recall them over 19 months after the day in question.

Chairman, the 17th June 2020 was a busy workday for me. I spent part of the day in Iveagh House and government buildings.

For context, we were about a week out from forming a government. I was involved in negotiating the program for government and at that time my party was considering the document. I was heavily involved in those briefings too.

Early on the evening of June 17th 2020 I was in Iveagh House before I moved to Government Buildings to watch the outcome of the Security Council vote with the Taoiseach. I passed through the open plan UN Policy Unit office space in Iveagh house on my way out.

This would have been well in advance of 8pm, the original time that the announcement of the results had been expected.

The UN team were busy working away in the various parts of the office. I recall there being a build-up and lots of expectation in advance of the vote. There was lots of nervousness too, in the few weeks previously we had had to change our campaign planning because of the pandemic, I had cancelled all travel and in person meetings and had spoken on the phone to more than 80 foreign ministers to ask them to support Ireland's bid. Ireland was up against formidable opponents in Norway and Canada.

When we took the seat on the first round I was relieved and delighted with the result, and took it as an endorsement of all of the campaign efforts of the Government. It was – and still is – an acknowledgement by other countries, big and small, that Ireland has an important contribution to make on the crucial matters of international peace and security that are central to the discussions on the UN Security Council.

After the vote, which finally came in at about ten past nine, I prepared for, and

then attended a press conference in Government Buildings, to welcome the result. The press conference was streamed live beginning at around 9.25 and concluded at approximately 9.55.

Following the press conference, I made my way back to work in Iveagh House and went in through the open plan office to congratulate the UN Policy Unit team. I stayed for around 15 minutes and what I saw was a happy group of staff, but a tired group. Some were packing up to go home, and some were on phones and computers continuing their work. After I spoke and said thank you to the team who had worked so hard, I went to my office to prepare for a call with the Norwegian Foreign Minister and to meet with members of my team to discuss the next morning, which included a number of requests for media interviews. We decided which ones I would do.

I was told by a member of my team that a group photograph had been tweeted.

That tweet was later taken down and the mistake acknowledged by then Secretary General Niall Burgess. At the time, I saw this as a mistake by the then Secretary General. However, with the benefit of hindsight, I accept that I should have formally raised the matter with him.

This was a breach of COVID guidelines in the workplace that should not have happened. The report before the committee outlines the details and what has flowed from that.

Chairman, I would like to note that this mistake made by the former Secretary General was a highly uncharacteristic one.

Niall Burgess is a very dedicated public servant, who, during the pandemic, made a significant contribution by overseeing our response to the biggest consular emergency in the history of the state with tens of thousands of citizens trapped or in difficulty overseas.

The Department of Foreign Affairs I know is the one that had to get trapped Irish citizens off cruise ships all over the world when the pandemic was first declared. The Department I know during COVID organised charter flights from India and South America and block booked dozens of scheduled flights with airlines to bring our people home. This is what I saw day in and day out up to and beyond June 17th 2020.

The team working in Iveagh House that day are those committed, hardworking and diligent civil servants. That photograph and the breach of COVID guidelines - and I am not excusing it - does not do justice to the integrity and dedication of that group of people.

Members, the photograph was public at the time in June 2020 but the controversy and public anger around it surfaced in late December 2021. I asked my new Secretary General, Joe Hackett, to undertake this review and he set the terms of reference.

The Review focused on the breach of COVID guidelines in the workplace captured in the photograph that was tweeted that evening as well as the events leading up to it which are detailed over hundreds of pages of emails and planning documents.

I was not present for the photograph, and my interaction with the staff involved took place after the photograph had been taken.

As Accounting Officer for the Department, it is the role of the Secretary General to review perceived breaches of conduct by staff in the workplace. And it was right that the Secretary General was supported by senior officials in the Human Resources Division, who are responsible for setting and monitoring the standards and behaviours of staff.

This matter is a matter of deep regret for all involved in it. I hope the Report, the appearance of both myself and the Secretary General before the Committee here today, the establishment of the facts of the matter, the acknowledgement that mistakes were made, and the sincere apologies of the different people involved can help us achieve a sense of perspective on this matter, and allow us re-focus on continuing on with the work being carried out by the Department, including on the UN Security Council. Ireland winning a seat on the UN Security Council on that evening of 17 June was the result of many years of dedication by so many and an endorsement of the values that the people of Ireland uphold.

And Ireland continues to play an important role on the Security Council. Last week, during a visit to Ireland, it was heartening to hear the praise for Ireland's role on the Security Council by the Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations, Amina Mohammed, with particular emphasis on our leadership on advancing women's leadership, peace and security, climate action and security and peacekeeping. This reflects the excellent work by staff in this Department and at the UN in New York, and also in the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces. We will continue these efforts over the next 10 and half months.

In conclusion, I totally understand that people would look at the photograph tweeted that night, and rightly have questions about what was going on, and be

annoyed, angry and upset. This incident shouldn't have happened. The former Secretary General has acknowledged this, and the current Secretary General has apologised again on behalf of the Department.

I look forward to your questions and thank you for listening.

[ENDS]