

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ AN AONTAIS EORPAIGH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN UNION AFFAIRS

Dé Céadaoin, 15 Feabhra 2017

Wednesday, 15 February 2017

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Seán Crowe,	Senator Gerard P. Craughwell,
Deputy Bernard J. Durkan,	Senator Terry Leyden,
Deputy Seán Haughey,	Senator Neale Richmond.
Deputy Frank O'Rourke,	

DEPUTY MICHAEL HEALY-RAE IN THE CHAIR.

General Affairs Council: Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Senator Paul Coghlan. Deputy Mattie McGrath has also indicated that he might be unable to attend.

I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach with responsibility for European affairs, Deputy Dara Murphy. Ongoing strong engagement between the committee and the Minister of State is very important and we appreciate the time he dedicates to working with us. Many committee members had the chance to meet him when we were in Brussels last week, but it is also helpful to have a formal discussion about the work of the General Affairs Council, as well as other key developments on the European agenda.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the joint committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I invite the Minister of State to make his opening remarks, after which I will open the meeting to questions from members. I again thank the Minister of State for taking time out to be here.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Dara Murphy): Thank you, Chairman, for your expression of thanks. I acknowledge the strong diplomatic presence at the meeting. I also thank you, Chairman, for your recent assistance in providing a pair for me which was very important and also for the excellent job you did two weeks ago when virtually every committee member was in Brussels. I am more than happy to answer questions and make my statement, but, equally, I am interested in hearing the observations of members following their meetings. I am aware, for example, that Senator Terry Leyden was in Valletta recently. There is very good engagement with the committee. I am delighted to be back before it and appreciate the agreement of members to having a slightly shorter format. Many of us will attend the Taoiseach's keynote address this afternoon entitled, Ireland at the Heart of a Changing European Union, which will take place in little over an hour. I will keep my intervention a little more brief than usual to allow time for interaction.

There have been two General Affairs Council meetings since my last appearance before the committee. The first of the General Affairs Councils I attended and the first under the Maltese Presidency was held in Valletta on 23 and 24 January. There were two agenda items, the first of which was on the Maltese Presidency's priorities - migration, the Single Market, security, social inclusion, Europe's neighbourhood and maritime issues. We very much support these priorities. We strongly believe they are realistic and achievable and address most of the key challenges facing the European Union.

Of the six priorities, the Maltese highlighted migration as being the No. 1 priority. The migration crisis may have faded to a certain extent from the media headlines in recent months, but it is far from being resolved. On the contrary, it remains one of the biggest challenges facing the European Union. A total of 180,000 migrants entered the Union last year via the central Mediterranean route - essentially from Libya to Italy. Behind this headline figure, sadly, hundreds drowned and many lives were shattered. Migration will and must remain high on the EU agenda for the foreseeable future and the March European Council which will involve Heads of State and Government will address it again, as it has done continuously since the crisis developed in the spring of 2015.

The second item on the agenda of the January General Affairs Council was the future of Europe. To frame discussions, the Maltese Presidency produced a short paper highlighting the need for citizens' trust to be re-established in the European project and for the delivery of a realistic agenda focused on practical issues. Ireland strongly supports this approach. We want to see the Bratislava process which was launched in the aftermath of the British referendum and the focus of President Tusk's informal summit of Heads of State and Government held in the Slovakian capital in September concentrate on practical issues which improve the lives of citizens through measures such as increased investment and the creation of more job opportunities. Progress in implementing the Single Market, in particular, the digital Single Market, will be of vital importance in achieving this goal.

On 3 February the leaders of the 27 member states had another meeting to discuss what they envisaged for the Rome summit on 25 March, which will mark the 60th anniversary of the birth of the European Union when the Treaty of Rome was signed. While no written conclusions emerged from the meeting, as I indicated, it broadly agreed that this was not the time for bold new initiatives, still less for consideration of treaty change. However, it was also agreed that we had to work on existing priorities in a much more energised fashion. Given the ever-changing geopolitical landscape, there was also a strong view that the importance of the European Union in protecting and promoting European values internally and globally had to be prioritised. The February meeting of the General Affairs Council was somewhat lighter, with preparations for the March European Council being the main agenda topic. The other topics on the agenda were the follow-up to the European Council and a communication from the European Commission on the next steps for a sustainable European future. This involves a mapping of the European Union's response to the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development adopted at a special summit in 2015. The Presidency flagged the main topics on the provisional agenda for the March European Council, namely, jobs, growth and investment, migration and security. As is normal practice, there will be a discussion of external relations, although specific topics for discussion have not yet been decided.

The Commission indicated that it viewed the March European Council as being about consolidation and restoring the security of citizens from both internal and external challenges. At the meeting I stated that, from Ireland's viewpoint, the March European Council would be an important step in refocusing the European Union. As we are all aware, there are a myriad of items competing for attention. However, we must also ensure adequate attention is given to economic issues. Sometimes, given the capacity of people to focus on other key matters, there is a danger that these bread and butter issues will become marginalised. They remain, however, issues of immediate concern to citizens and addressing them would improve their lives. If we want to seriously address the gap which many EU citizens see between the European Union and the lives they lead, this is a pragmatic way of doing so and showing the link. I hope the next meeting of the European Council will provide a tangible demonstration of the European

Union's determination to focus on and deliver measures that will improve the lives of European citizens in a concrete and specific manner. The British Government has repeated its commitment to formally notify by the end of March the United Kingdom's intention to leave the European Union. My sense is that this notification will be delivered well before the end of next month. There has been much recent speculation about the date but, either way, given that the next European Council meeting is due to take place at the start of March, it seems unlikely that there will be much discussion at that meeting. However, as the Chairman will be aware from his visit to Brussels last week, Brexit is very much the subject of a discussion taking place on the margins with officials, Commissioners and politicians. The first step after the British notification will be for the European Council to adopt guidelines for the negotiations. It is likely that there will be a special meeting of the European Council some weeks after the notification. It will then be for the General Affairs Council which is attended by Ministers with responsibility for European affairs to formally open the negotiations and agree on a more detailed mandate for the Commission, as negotiator. Ambassadors in Brussels - Mr. Declan Kelleher in Ireland's case - assisted by a special working group, will monitor the progress of the negotiations on a weekly basis and the General Affairs Council which feeds directly into the European Council will oversee the negotiations at a political level and issue new instructions, as needed.

To be clear, the decision making will take place at a political and at European Council level between the 27 member states. While there will be some additional meetings, the General Affairs Council will meet on a monthly basis and our ambassador will be involved in weekly meetings of the working group which will also have officials from Ireland in attendance. The various groups in Ireland will meet perhaps twice each week. There will, therefore, be a high level of engagement. Having met Ambassador Kelleher and some of our team of officials in the Permanent Representation in Brussels, I hope the Chairman is satisfied with their level of expertise and engagement.

Given the way in which politics in Europe works, I restate the very important role the political groups in the European Parliament will play. The group to which the Fine Gael Party belongs, the European People's Party, has a role, as do the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, ALDE, to which Fianna Fáil belongs, the GUE/NGL group, the Socialist Group and Independents who also have a strong presence.

I hope the engagement by members the week before last will mark the start of a process of continued engagement. I understand the committee will continue to be a forum European Union officials will attend. I have visited 15 member states in recent months and one of my key objectives has been to speak to committees such as this one in other countries, not only to make Ireland's views known on key issues with respect to security, the peace process and the free movement of people but also to listen to the concerns of other countries, many of which have similar concerns to ours. I also wish to identify possibilities for building alliances and strategic partnerships. Many of those with whom we engage are members of other political groupings and relationships with them will be very important. The term "green jersey" is sometimes viewed as being a little fluffy, but we should not underestimate the links and influence we have. This will be a long game. Changes in the governments of member states will continue to take place on a cyclical basis.

I compliment the work done by the joint committee. I will be pleased to take questions from members and listen to observations they may have following their recent visit to Brussels.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State for his engagement with a delegation from the committee when we visited Brussels last week. I also thank the secretariat who organised the

trip so well. We were all well prepared. I thank the Deputies and Senators for their commitment to the process over a couple of days. I acknowledge the cross-party work of our MEPs and their staff in Brussels. One often hears negativity about politicians, but they are doing their best for us in stormy waters and troubled times. It is only right to put on the record of this committee that we acknowledge the assistance of our MEPs and their staff who are working over there on our behalf.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I congratulate the Chairman on the way he chaired the meetings in Brussels and ensured everybody from this committee had an opportunity to make their points. Likewise, the secretariat did a fantastic job, ensuring we got 14 meetings in two days when we met quite a number of important people.

Until I went to Brussels I was unaware of the level of work the Minister of State had undertaken. I compliment him on that. His travels around the EU, his efforts to drive the Irish message home and his willingness to listen to other countries' issues are to be commended. Unfortunately, however, that work has not been sufficiently appreciated. I therefore wish to put on record my thanks to the Minister of State for the work he is doing.

I have concerns but they do not necessarily reflect on the Minister of State. I have been saying for some time that I want Ireland to take a leadership role rather than following one. I could see leadership in Brussels but I cannot see it at home. It is to be hoped that will be sorted out today. I would like to see us lay down a number of priorities that we will want to raise during the negotiations on Brexit. Five or six were mentioned in Brussels, but there is no point in laying down priorities unless we have solutions. How far advanced are we in presenting not just the problems but the solutions to them? We are all aware of the Border and trade issues, but the island of Ireland is our concern. We have enjoyed the ability to travel throughout the 32 counties unimpeded and I do not want to see that change, nor does the Minister of State. There is no point in Ireland and the UK agreeing on that, however. It is a question of how advanced we are on getting agreement from the other 26 EU member states. That is my concern.

The Minister spoke about re-establishing the European project at citizen level, but there is a huge problem there. That is because the European project has been demonised for as long as I can remember. In the Oireachtas, we constantly blame the EU for imposing directives obliging us to do various things. We go there to negotiate, but we must now stand up to the plate. Water is a classic case in point. It was sold as something the Europeans told us to do, not something we negotiated in Europe. I will not ask the Minister of State to comment on that, but if he wishes to do so, I would be interested.

As we go through the Brexit process, I am concerned that we should be able to access funding for market diversification, that is, to move away from the British market where we have 41% of our agricultural output and 35% of our textile and leather industry. I would like to see us moving that to other markets. Is such market diversification funding available and is there such a willingness on the part of the EU? I think it was Monsieur Barnier who suggested that they wanted to get away from derogations as they want a single policy in Europe. However, a derogation on state aid for Monaghan Dairies was mentioned in Brussels. That company is getting a huge proportion of its milk from across the Border. If that stops, where does the company go?

Does the Minister of State know how far the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport has advanced with respect to opening up new routes to Europe? I am referring in particular to our ports and a European super-highway of heavy ferries travelling from Rosslare, Cork, Water-

ford, Foynes, Galway and Dublin.

I think I have asked enough questions of the Minister of State, as others wish to speak. I thank him for the work he has done. I wish him every success as he moves forward because he has a big job ahead of him.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I welcome the Minister of State to the committee. I still have this image in my head of the fluffy green jersey, so I wonder if the Minister of State is using the right softener.

This is an important issue and we are all trying to be on the same page. We all accept there are substantial challenges facing the EU, both internally and externally. The Minister of State has mentioned some of those challenges in this debate.

We all have major concerns about Brexit, so the work we carried out in Brussels was useful in that regard. Some 15 committees were mentioned and a lot of work is going on. We are all trying to do our best, be it privately or publicly. Does the Minister of State have any recommendations for the committee in terms of its work, including outreach and inviting witnesses to appear before it?

We had quite a number of meetings in the couple of days we spent in Brussels, including talks with the European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly. She spoke about the importance of transparency, which links in to the need for citizens' trust to be re-established. Visiting various committees, one gets a sense that the issue needs to be tackled. In this committee and others we have discussed how the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, TTIP, negotiations were handled. People had concerns about the secrecy surrounding such fundamental trade deals which impact on people's lives, not just in Europe but also around the globe. It is important for the public to buy into such deals.

It is similar with the Brexit negotiations. It is important for all of us wearing the green jersey to have an understanding of the Government's strategy. We may disagree with, add to or subtract from that strategy but at some stage when we visit various capitals we must have a sense of where the Irish Government stands.

The Minister of State mentioned migration and we all accept that this is the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War. Some 5,000 people drowned in the Mediterranean last year. Side deals have been done with some countries, but there has already been criticism of Turkey and Libya. Does the Minister of State see side deals as the way forward in tackling the refugee crisis? Should we consider being more supportive of those countries on the front line of migration, particularly Greece and Italy? Thousands of migrants are landing in those countries daily during the summer months.

I am conscious that I shall not get an opportunity anywhere else to discuss the fact that Ibahim Halawa is facing his 19th trial hearing having spent three years of his young life behind bars. Yesterday his trial was postponed again. We all know the circumstances behind his case and delegations have gone to Egypt. In the first week of March the foreign Minister for Egypt will attend the EU Council meeting in Malta to discuss the ongoing situation in Egypt. As no progress was made at the trial hearing yesterday will the Irish Government prioritise the case at the next EU Council meeting and make it clear that there can be no further normalisation of relations between Egypt and the EU while an Irish and European citizen remains in a Cairo prison? Does the Minister of State share my view on same?

The Maltese Presidency of the EU has produced a short paper on the future of the Europe. People have demanded that we build a progressive, prosperous and social Europe that respects sovereignty. Has the Minister of State got a sense that this goal needs to be prioritised? Have we learned anything from Brexit? Even though Ireland campaigned for a remain vote it does not mean that everything is hunky-dory in the European Union. Clearly huge problems exist that need to be addressed.

Lastly, does the Irish Government plan to publish a White Paper on Brexit?

Deputy Seán Haughey: I thank the Chairman and the committee secretariat for the work that they put into the recent visit to Brussels by the committee. I also thank the Minister for engaging with us in Brussels and enlightening us on his work on the various issues of the day, most particularly Brexit.

We met important people in Brussels and people openly conveyed their views to us. Probably one of the most important meetings, without intentionally singling anyone out, was with Michel Barnier and Guy Verhofstadt given their crucial role in Brexit negotiations. While there was huge sympathy for and understanding of the Irish position, I took the clear message from the meetings that we had to come up with a solution, in particular a solution for the hard border question. They threw the issues back at us by asking us to come forward with practical and workable solutions. Is the Government working on practical solutions to this issue? The Taoiseach informed the Dáil this morning that he brought a memo to Government on the Brexit issue and there will be a big speech this afternoon in the Mansion House. Have we moved forward with coming up with practical solutions to our particular problems to put on the negotiation table?

When we were in Brussels I picked up on the fact that the committees of the European Parliament, that deal with all of the sectoral issues, have to date prepared 20 reports on Brexit. I am sure that is a very useful amount of knowledge that has been prepared by the European Parliament. I hope that the Irish Government will tap into that information. The committees dwell on the micro-economic issues as they manifest themselves and the reports are available and ongoing. I am sure they will be a useful resource for Ireland in helping it to tackle this particular challenge.

Can the Minister of State update us on his visits to the European capitals? The Taoiseach is visiting the Heads of Government and the Minister is visiting his equivalent throughout the member states. The Minister of State undertook a number of visits throughout the European Union to inform the other 26 member states of our particular concerns and listen to their concerns. Has the process been finalised? Have we contacted everybody who needed to be contacted initially? How is the programme going?

I was interested in what the Minister of State had to say about the challenges that face the European Union and the future of Europe, in particular the Bratislava process that was launched following the vote on the British referendum on 23 June. I agree with what he said about the Irish position. I agree that we need to concentrate on practical issues and bring forward a realistic agenda so that the citizens of Europe engage with it, fully promote it and support it. In particular, he laid emphasis on increased investment and creating more job opportunities with which I agree. He also mentioned the Single Market and the digital Single Market. If we can bring forward practical solutions and Europe is seen to deliver then support for the European project will be maintained and increased.

The Rome Summit will take place on 25 March, which is the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome. I presume it will be a great opportunity to return to basics and outline for all of us the values of the European Union, what it stands for and what it has prevented. The European Union has prevented war and brought peace and stability in our time. The summit should be used to reinforce that agenda. I look forward to seeing that being rolled out in advance of and following the summit on 25 March.

Senator Terry Leyden: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Dara Murphy, his officials and the representatives from the embassies here today. I heard a great report on his visit to Brussels last week. I had planned to go and even had my airline ticket booked but unfortunately circumstances prevented me from going. The meetings were in very good hands and I have heard excellent reports about the meetings that took place. At a meeting of this committee the Minister of State recommended that we travel as a group to Brussels. His proposal was implemented by the committee and he was also able to attend as well. As he will know, I was in Malta to represent the chair of this committee.

I am convinced that there should be a dedicated Brexit Minister. I have no problem with the Minister of State taking up the role. Like Britain, we should have a section of a Department to deal with Brexit. The Prime Minister, Theresa May, is not the Brexit Minister and the President of the Commission does not deal with the negotiations. I feel that the appointment of a Brexit Minister will happen in the not too distant future. Fianna Fáil has laid it on the line by appointing a spokesperson on Brexit. We should have a one-stop-shop unit in Dublin that is dedicated to dealing with and processing everything to do with Brexit. It would be useful for us to have a unit that an organisation like the IFA, other organisations, business people, investors or exporters could approach to discuss Brexit. Too many people have their fingers in the pie. It is unfair on the Taoiseach that he has to be so engaged with the minute details of Brexit. Of course he and the Cabinet have the overall responsibility. As I have suggested before, it would be easy to amalgamate the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. It is quite nonsensical in a small country like ours to have two different Departments, one dealing with raising funds while the other deals with expenditure. The measure was introduced to satisfy the Labour Party that formed part of the last Government. It is not a requirement for this Government but that debate is another day's work. In terms of Brexit, it is important that anything that can be done should be done.

I have heard a report but I do not know whether it is accurate that the Government, or some part of the Government, is considering recreating the customs posts at the Border. The issue was reported in some newspaper that I read in the past few days. I am greatly concerned about that report. That is something we should never concede at the beginning of negotiations. We could never consider initiating it or conceding that point because we must have an open border. I am unsure whether the people present are aware of the situation or whether the Revenue is looking at it.

Senator Craughwell made some good points. As part of the preparation for Brexit we must increase and expand our exports to mainland Europe through France. We have a direct route from Rosslare. That is important. We have roll-on, roll-off ferry facilities and the whole question of availability and speed arises. That is in the transport area but all Departments should feed in to one major overall plan.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I congratulate the Minister of State for his adroit chairmanship of the delegation and presentation to the various parties. Likewise, I congratulate the secretariat here and all the contact people in Brussels as well as the Commissioner, Mr. Hogan,

and the permanent staff there for the tremendous work they did in laying on the programme, co-ordinating it and putting it together. I thank the Minister of State for his hospitality and for his contribution to the process as well.

Several points come to mind. I will go through the initial part of the Minister of State's speech. The question on migration is still live. Sadly, it reflects on the European Union as a whole. We all know that this is something that should have been possible to resolve in a better way, rather than the haphazard way in which it was resolved. It is well and good for people to say we do not want immigrants or people coming ashore and so on. The end product was that thousands of children lost their lives - they were drowned at sea - and many more starved on the way to what they thought was freedom, solace and comfort. Whatever they were coming from, they were not running away from health, happiness and good fortune. They were running for their lives. Sadly, some countries in the Union saw that as a threat. The Union, as a whole, needs to come together to recognise the need for co-ordination in such situations, rather than tempting everyone to put up the razor wire, as it were. I know that countries in the front line are the first in line. However, the Union has to be able to deal with the situation in a humane and amicable way. If it does not, then it will continue to reflect badly.

The future of Europe was referenced and there is no doubt this is timely. We hope that out of all the stress and trauma from migration, Brexit or whatever, a re-definition of the visions of Europe will re-emerge in a meaningful way that will relate to all the people of Europe. These people live in Europe and are members of the European Union. We are not outsiders. We are all part of Europe and the European Union. We need to see a recognition of that in future.

I do not agree with my colleague Senator Terry Leyden in respect of the handling of Brexit. I believe the one-stop-shop is already in place. Only one country has a Brexit Minister and that country is leaving the Union. It would be dangerous to emulate that set-up and have the debate between the country leaving the Union with a specified Minister. There is a serious danger that we could be categorised in the same way and become part and parcel of that exit strategy. I would not advise such an approach.

We were greeted warmly by all the people we met. We should recognise the great understanding of Ireland's unique position as an island off Europe. Logistical issues arise and serious issues arise in so far as our future is concerned. This is the most important time in the history of this State since we joined the European Union. It is up to ourselves to make of it what we want. We were encouraged to set out our stall and our list of requirements, as opposed to demands. Mr. Barnier and Mr. Verhofstadt were vying with each other in respect of how they could be helpful. That is a useful basis from which to operate. There was recognition that we are not an adjunct of our next-door neighbour but an independent state. More important, there was recognition that the European Union recognises the importance of the island of Ireland as an economic and political entity. There was a recognition that it has worked well, that the peace agreement was sacrosanct and that it was part and parcel of our economy, North and South. There was also recognition that we did not opt to leave the Union. The island of Ireland did not opt to leave the Union, although others did. It is not for us to facilitate others. It is for us to do the best we can to facilitate the island of Ireland as an economic entity in the first instance. That has to be borne in mind. I believe it is borne in mind and all the indications we have received from the Minister of State and from everyone else we met was that it would be borne in mind.

It is also important to recognise that we are going to be part of the negotiations. The country and the Taoiseach will be part of the negotiating team on behalf of the European Union. The Minister of State will be part of the process as well. Ireland will be part of the process as one

of 27 member states.

As we stand, we have it all to play for. Whatever emerges from the debate taking place in the coming six months or year – things will begin to gel into place at that stage – will have a fundamental and lasting effect on our country and people. There must be recognition that the customs of the island of Ireland are important. We are in a happy position now and we need to retain what we have become accustomed to. We have progressed a long way in this country in the past 30 years, albeit through tough territory and in spite of many obstacles and deviations *en route*. Everyone made a contribution to the Good Friday Agreement and the good relationship between North and South. That is part and parcel of what must remain at the core of any discussions. I believe that is recognised by everyone. There is no intention of deviating from that.

We realise that we are not the only negotiators as well. There are 26 others and we need to convince them. I believe the Minister of State has done a good job in touring the capitals of Europe and meeting his counterparts to discuss this issue. It is clear that the Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade have done likewise. In any event, the battle is not over yet. We need to be careful how we concentrate the argument. We need to convince our European colleagues of the importance of the survival of the economic entity of Ireland. Failure to do that would be a failure on the part of the European Union to recognise the integral part we now play in the Union.

Numerous things will happen quickly once Article 50 is triggered. Currency fluctuation will take place rapidly, depending on what is said at a given time and place. That will have a varying effect on our economy on a weekly, if not a daily, basis. We need to do our job well and achieve what we need to achieve, as opposed to what we want to achieve. The fundamentals are in place. That is what we have now. We cannot afford to lose any part of it, especially because we did not initiate this process. We will be part and parcel of what happens as a result of the process. Anyway, we know where we have to go and I know from our discussions with the Minister of State in the course of the meetings and ordinary business that we all recognise that much.

Chairman: Minister of State, we will go to you now. I appreciate that you are under pressure for time and we understand you may have to condense your answers.

Deputy Dara Murphy: I have a little time. I thank the committee members for their questions and kind words.

I will take the comments in the order that committee members have spoken. There is some overlap although not a great deal. Senator Craughwell asked questions about the process and our priorities. The process of the divorce, so to speak, has four key pillars. We must be satisfied at this stage that issues pertaining to Ireland, such as the common travel area and the peace process, are in pillar one and will be dealt with at an early stage. We will continue to work with the Commission to present solutions for concerns which are unique to Ireland. It is true to say there is an appetite for us to present solutions and work is ongoing in so far as it can be, because we still have not seen the absolute nature of what the UK will present within the coming four weeks. Work is being carried out at a very detailed level in many Departments with respect to the movement of people. The position of everybody, including the Taoiseach, committee members and, to be fair, the British, is we do not want any impediment to the free movement of people around the island. This is not something we consider possible to dilute in any way. It is of extreme importance to us with regard to both sides of the Border and east and west. There is, as committee members have heard, good understanding throughout the EU of

the circumstances unique to us.

The problem we have at citizen level has been mentioned. It is 100% correct to state we must communicate better what we do as politicians. We must show the work we do around the table, irrespective of where we are on the political spectrum, is about the citizen. Something I found most frustrating about the debate and referendum in the UK was continuous reference to the European Union and its institutions in the third person. Every decision taken by the European Union had British Ministers and officials at the table, but somehow everything was everybody else's fault. We must ensure all politicians take more account themselves. I am a strong supporter of the European Union but it would be very silly and simplistic to suggest it is perfect. Many people feel it can be improved, but we must try to improve it from the inside out, particularly as a small country.

We will work to support categories and sectors which may be specifically disadvantaged. The issue of ports and new routes was mentioned. To follow on from other questions, it is vital we build new alliances and look to diversify into new markets, irrespective of how severe the challenges will be with respect to trade, and this work is ongoing.

To respond to Deputy Crowe on what the committee can do, it should be robust when senior people are in the country. The committee should get them to come before it, whether they are Commissioners, politicians or members of committees of other parliaments, and the committee should not just continue to go to Europe at intervals. Something we should focus on is going before parliamentary committees. It is of value to meet opposite numbers, Ministers and members of Government. We did this in Bucharest and Greece several weeks ago and will do so in Hungary and Austria next week. Through this we get a sense of where cross-party support exists on the issues we bring and our unique circumstances. We can also pick up on the objectives of other countries. Committee members could speak to Commissioners and explain that as Independent members or as members of Sinn Féin or Fianna Fáil, they agree with what the Government is doing. Equally, there would be nothing wrong with committee members stating that in particular areas the Government could do better or that they disagree with policy. We should embrace this. The committee will have a very important role given the Ministers with responsibility for Europe will meet on a monthly basis to engage in the negotiations. The committee will probably be the conduit of the information that will flow between the Ministers.

The issue of Turkey and migration is absolutely vital. There are many concerns about the deal done with Turkey. The €3 billion is going directly to support the refugees. We must continue to work with countries of origin and countries of transit and try to continue to remove the reasons people leave.

I could not agree more with regard to what must be the horrendous frustration of Ibrahim Halawa and his family. We have engaged the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, and the Ceann Comhairle's office and cross-party groups have travelled out. We have robustly stated we want him to be released and we will continue our work on this. However, Egypt is a sovereign independent nation with a court process that is what it is.

I have met Michel Barnier on a number of occasions, the Taoiseach will meet him next week and the committee has also met him. We will repeatedly engage with Mr. Barnier, who is well abreast through work he did previously as a Commissioner, on issues pertaining to regional policy and the Border region in Northern Ireland. Very strong importance will be given to the deliberations on the unique elements that exist between parts of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, with respect to the common travel area. Where we can present solutions

to our partners, show they will not impact on them and get their support we should achieve success.

We are on rounds three and four with many countries with respect to visits, contacts and meetings. The messages pertaining to our country cannot be said too often, particularly given that negotiations on common travel will take place in the first section. We share concerns about the trade issues with many countries. Many countries to the east of the United Kingdom have very similar concerns about exporting food into the large British market and we are working to build alliances. We can get details on a programme of work involving me, the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, the Taoiseach and other Ministers, particularly those whose remits are most relevant.

Deputy Haughey spoke about the Rome summit and getting back to concrete deliverable measures. He also mentioned the digital Single Market. Roaming charges have been removed and we have data portability, VAT simplification and copyright improvements. They benefit all the European Union, but they really benefit small, peripheral and open economies such as ours. That is why, at the formation of this Government, I was asked to play a co-ordinating role in the digital Single Market. While everyone will benefit, the more remote, smaller and more open an economy is, the more such measures will help.

I like the broad range of topics covered at this committee, and Europe is a very broad church. We almost always agree with Senator Leyden, but I do not think a Brexit Minister would work and Deputy Durkan gave a couple of reasons. First, we have a one-stop-shop in the Department of the Taoiseach which has authority when corresponding with Departments such as Finance or Justice and Equality. There is extra prestige and urgency when a request comes from the mother Department, as it were. If we had that somewhere else, it might dilute the whole-of-Government approach. Senior officials in the Department of the Taoiseach have been involved in our Presidencies and they co-ordinate whole-of-Government approaches to European Council meetings.

The second reason is more practical. Agriculture and fisheries Ministers frequently meet in Brussels to discuss detailed aspects of fisheries policy, quotas, physical maps, jurisdiction and law. Transport Ministers might be meeting on the same day to discuss ports or something else, but the meeting might take place in Luxembourg. At the moment we are talking about everything together, such as the movement of goods and people, the common travel areas and institutions and other bodies, but negotiations on Brexit will be broken into chunks, such as agricultural issues, trade issues etc. We will need this to be at the very top of the agenda of relevant Ministers. We do not believe that abdicating responsibility from line Ministers to anybody else would be in our best interests. I am not fully sure where the UK Brexit Minister will sit. Boris Johnson is Foreign Secretary but its finance Minister and others will also be present. We are not sure if the Brexit Minister will have a co-ordinating role back in the UK or whether it will be Theresa May. It will be a full-time function of mine and my team but that will also apply to many others.

There was a question on Border posts. We need to be clear that this was a decision of the United Kingdom. The UK has decided to leave but we are not leaving. We will not be the ones putting any customs posts up on this island. We do not want them and will not initiate them. We will be working hard to minimise the effect on our people and we will not do this work or come up with any solutions that work against our national interests. We respect the UK's decision but we fundamentally think it was the wrong thing to do. The UK has said it does not want to be in the Single Market but we want to be in the Single Market. The UK has not yet told us how they propose to square the circle with respect to the customs union.

Senator Terry Leyden: The story about customs posts is circulating in the media today, so it is timely for the Minister of State to refute it.

Deputy Dara Murphy: I am pleased to restate what the Taoiseach and others have stated on a number of occasions. The UK is out of the Single Market and has a new customs arrangement. These will present difficulties but they are not ours. The UK will have to look very seriously at the implications.

Deputy Durkan said there were concerns relevant to the island of Ireland, and that is true, but we need to continue to work on the specific difficulties as the discussions evolve. The issues show the importance of the all-Ireland civic dialogue, and we should continue with sectoral groups looking at specific concerns as they arise, sector by sector. There will be a differentiation between the part that deals with the free movement of people and those parts dealing with the free movement of goods, services and trade, which may take a long time to establish. This goes back to Senator Leyden's question about the customs relationship. We do not know what that will be, but preparations are very much ongoing to consider the potential outcomes, though this should not be mistaken in any way for an acceptance that there should be restrictions.

If members wish to send further questions by email, we will be happy to give more detail. I apologise to Heidi Loughheed and the committee secretariat for not acknowledging the great work they did in preparing for this.

Chairman: I acknowledge the ambassadors and their staff, who are in the Gallery today. They are always welcome. I thank the Minister and his staff for appearing before the committee today.

The joint committee went into private session at 2.40 p.m. and adjourned at 2.55 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 21 February 2017.