

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ AN AONTAIS EORPAIGH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN UNION AFFAIRS

Dé Céadaoin, 28 Feabhra 2018

Wednesday, 28 February 2018

The Joint Committee met at 10 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Colm Brophy,	Senator Gerard P. Craughwell,
Deputy Bernard J. Durkan,	Senator Neale Richmond.
Deputy Seán Haughey,	
Deputy Mattie McGrath,	

SENATOR TERRY LEYDEN IN THE CHAIR.

Transparency and Ireland's Involvement in European Union Institutions: European Movement Ireland

Vice Chairman: Apologies have been received from the Chairman, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, and Senator Neale Richmond.

I remind members to ensure their mobile phones are switched off for the duration of the meeting. This is important as interference from them causes serious problems for broadcasting, sound and editorial staff.

On behalf of all members of the joint committee, I welcome Ms Noelle O'Connell, executive director of European Movement Ireland, to discuss transparency in the European institutions and Ireland's involvement in them. Few organisations are as active in the area of European Union affairs as European Movement Ireland. I have dealt with it during the years and it is very familiar to the committee and its members. It explains to citizens how the European Union works and encourages many to engage and work with its institutions. We are delighted that its representatives are with us and thank them for coming in such inclement weather. I extended the apologies of Senator Neale Richmond, but he has now arrived.

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 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.

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.

Ms Noelle O'Connell: I wish the distinguished members of the Joint Committee on European Affairs a good morning and apologise for the delay in our arrival. We were impacted on by the sneachta which we have braved to be here. We thank the committee for the invitation to engage with it on the very important topic of transparency and accountability in European institutions and Ireland's involvement in them. I am accompanied by my colleague, Ms Nora Trench Bowles, our policy and advocacy manager. The committee is to be commended for deliberating on this important issue which is crucial in bringing decision-making closer to EU citizens and increasing democratic accountability.

By way of background, it might be helpful if I outlined the origins of European Movement Ireland. Having been founded in 1954, it is Ireland's longest established not-for-profit voluntary membership organisation dedicated to furthering and connecting Ireland and the European Union. That is the mission that underpins the organisation and forms part of our values. It has been key to much of its work as a civil society organisation for more than 60 years, as it endeavours to promote and ensure transparency and engagement at all levels in Ireland's ever-evolving relationship with the European Union. As such, the issue on which I will engage with the committee is of particular significance to the organisation and permeates and underpins many of its endeavours.

The last time I presented to the committee was in October 2017 when I was accompanied by the chairman of the organisation, Mr. Maurice Pratt, and we had a very fruitful and timely discussion with the distinguished members on the future of the European Union. As we said then in welcoming this engagement, the input of national politicians, institutions and parliaments on European issues was a crucial bridge between citizens and the European Union and certainly amplified and attached greater significance to our voice in the European Union. As part of its presentation to the committee in October, European Movement Ireland called for a greater national debate on the topic of the future of the European Union, emphasising the limited window of opportunity to have an input into this critically important and very fast-moving process, coming as it did at a crucial juncture in the evolution of the Union. We believe this engagement also helps to promote transparency and engagement as vital in lessening any connection deficit between EU institutions and citizens.

I am very pleased to report that the future of the European Union has since been the principal focus of our work, as it will continue to be for several years. We have been working in partnership with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in carrying out a country-wide public consultation process on the topic of the future of the Europe which was launched in November 2017 in the Science Gallery by the Taoiseach; the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade who has special responsibility for Brexit, Deputy Simon Coveney, and the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, Deputy Helen McEntee. We welcome the ongoing commitment by the Government to furthering and facilitating this vital debate, in which we are very pleased to play our part, particularly considering European Movement Ireland's long-standing aim and intention to encourage and promote Ireland's contribution at all levels to the debates on how to progress and develop European issues, particularly in Ireland.

We steadfastly believe Ireland's future remains within the European Union. Each year we commission Red C to conduct an independent survey of the public's views on the European Union. Public opinion on Ireland's membership of the European Union has remained very positive and fluctuated little since 2013, peaking at 90% support in 2016 but remaining in the high 80s ever since polling began. Public opinion on Ireland's membership of the European Union has remained very high and has fluctuated little since 2013, peaking at 90% support in 2016 but remaining in the high 80s since we began polling. There is little evidence that the Irish public supports the view that we should follow the UK out of the European Union. Indeed, support for this idea has dropped by 13% since 2013 and recent Eurobarometer reports underpin the various Red C polls. However, reasoned and robust debate on what we, as Irish and EU citizens, would want a reforming European Union to look like is important. It helps us to formulate our own views and thoughts on these multifaceted issues and helps us to progress, input into and influence the European Union-wide debate which will shape our future for decades to come.

In that light we are proactively engaging with people around the country by hosting a series of citizen dialogues. These regional events have been designed with a bottom-up approach in mind to garner, hear and listen to people's needs, concerns and positions, which are very complex and nuanced. People are encouraged to get involved and have their say and, through a variety of different platforms across social media and in face-to-face citizens' dialogues, we have engaged on critically important questions such as a prosperous and competitive European Union; a safe and secure European Union; a sustainable union; a socially responsible union; and shaping globalisation. Spearheaded by the Minister of State for European Affairs, we have already hosted very lively and robust citizen dialogues in Galway in Connacht, with the Munster event taking place in Cork last week. These are conversations about how we wish the European Union to develop and what Ireland's role can be.

I assure committee members that the meetings have been frank, enlightening and informative. Rather than concentrating solely on Brexit, which will undoubtedly create many challenges for Ireland given that we will be the remaining member state most adversely affected by the UK's decision to leave the EU, people are thinking of the bigger picture and asking themselves what they would like the European Union to look like in ten, 20, 30 or 40 years' time. How do we, as a country and as a people, want to shape and influence it? We hope this process will help to spark a nationwide debate on the future of Europe and we call on distinguished members of the committee to continue to lead and guide that debate. Further citizen dialogues will take place in Ulster in Donegal next week and in Meath on 19 April, followed by a major event in the Royal Hospital Kilmainham on Europe Day, 9 May.

There has been widespread interest in the series of national citizen dialogues and we were very pleased that it was recognised at European level when the European Commission recently referred to Ireland as an example of best practice in communicating with EU citizens as part of the wider future of Europe debate. Discussion at these dialogues has touched upon the need for more awareness and understanding of, and engagement with, European initiatives and the need to better communicate and explain what the European Union does. European Movement, EM, Ireland is firmly of the view that these elements, which form the foundation of much of our work, feed into the wider context and the importance of transparency.

Another area where Ireland has been referred to as an example of best practice across Europe is the mandatory lobbying register. The European Commission and the European Parliament have jointly operated a lobbying register since 2011, of which European Movement Ireland is one of nearly 12,000 registrants. Following on from a European Commission proposal, negotiations on a mandatory EU transparency register covering the Commission, Parliament and Council are due to start in the coming months. European Movement Ireland welcomes this development, which will further transparency requirements across the EU decision-making institutions. We will follow, with interest, the results of these upcoming negotiations.

I am aware that the Joint Committee on European Affairs is investing considerable time in hearing from experts on the topic of transparency in European institutions, including from the European Ombudsman, Ms Emily O'Reilly, earlier this month. It is great to see an Irish woman at the helm of this important body, leading work which impacts the lives of EU citizens when it comes to their dealings and engagements with the different EU institutions. EM Ireland welcomes the recommendations of the European Ombudsman to increase the level of transparency in the Council legislative process. As she advocated in her address to the committee, better facilitating public scrutiny as to how member state governments position themselves in EU law-making could go some way to enabling stronger accountability in those laws. European Movement Ireland will follow with interest the Council's response to the European Ombudsman recommendations, which is due before 9 May. We hope the Council's response allows for the value in deepening the transparency and accountability of that institution.

We will also follow, with interest, the progress and impact of the Dutch Parliament's paper on transparency in the Council. As the paper outlines, the role of national parliaments in overseeing and scrutinising the Council's actions puts them in a very privileged position to act and we call on distinguished members of the committee to support this impetus in an effort to increase accountability and democratic legitimacy in EU decision-making. Greater transparency and accountability can also help address the tendency for member state governments to Europeanise failure and nationalise success, a subject on which I have often spoken before this committee. It is crucial that we all take responsibility for the role we play in EU matters and for

how actively we engage with Europe and the EU institutions. Our role in disseminating factual information about Europe, in language that is clear and understandable, includes explaining the decision-making structures of the European Union. It is not the case that faceless bureaucrats decide on EU laws - it is our democratically accountable and nationally elected Ministers who do so, as well as MEPs directly elected by EU citizens. In this light, we regularly produce Just the Facts policy briefings and all-you-need-to-know explainers. This week, the committee will have received our Just the Facts briefing on the informal European Council meeting which took place last Friday and we recently issued a series of explainers on the composition of the European Parliament post Brexit and the *Spitzenkandidaten* process.

The accountability campaign is another example of our work related to our belief in promoting transparency and accountability at all levels. For many years, European Movement Ireland has tracked a variety of statistical indicators covering the Oireachtas, the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council of Europe and has looked at Ireland's EU engagement through these institutions. Beyond these statistical indicators, European Movement Ireland continues to shed light on, and work to explain, Ireland's engagement at European Union level. This is particularly the case in regard to Brexit which has been a principle focus of our work since late 2015 and remains so.

As developments around the Brexit negotiations have shown, engagements outside the formal EU institutions and structures are also crucial. The Government's programme of strategic engagement with EU partners across the different EU member state capitals and on the margins of Council meetings is a strong and productive example of this. The efforts of this diplomatic push, as well as the push made by many political, business and civil society organisations through their European networks, are important and are to be commended on ensuring that Ireland, and particularly the Border on our island, was one of the top three priorities of the first phase of the Brexit negotiations. This success made clear, once again, that when Ireland actively, constructively and transparently engages at an EU level, the impact we can have can be great.

Vice Chairman: I thank Ms O'Connell. The weather has affected membership attendance today and some have not made it here. The public meetings European Movement Ireland is holding are very commendable. I commend Ms O'Connell, the chairman Maurice Pratt and their organisation on this because these meetings provide a great service to the public by explaining what Europe is about. Does Ms O'Connell find that the citizens at European Movement Ireland events ask for more transparency in the Council or elsewhere, and does Ms O'Connell feel this issue is one of concern to specialists or to the system?

Deputy Seán Haughey: I have a related question. I would like to thank Ms O'Connell and her colleagues for beating the elements and for coming in to the committee today. The meeting has been impacted by the weather. I also thank them for all the work they do. It is really appreciated by the Oireachtas.

Brexit has been a big wake-up call for all EU citizens in how we do our business. Ms O'Connell referred to the RedC polls. I believe there has been more of an appreciation of the EU since Brexit by citizens right across Europe and in Ireland. I thank the witness for presenting the facts. The European Movement Ireland submission deals with a lot of the technical issues, which we do not get in the mainstream media, even *The Irish Times*. Some of the less sexy issues are outlined in the submission, after each Council meeting, and this is much appreciated. I also appreciate the work being done by European Movement Ireland around transparency in the EU institutions.

My question follows on from that of the Vice Chairman and relates to the citizens' dialogue on the future of Europe that is being held throughout Ireland by European Movement Ireland. It is a very good exercise and I know that the Minister of State, Deputy Helen McEntee, is co-ordinating this. For the benefit of the committee will Ms O'Connell outline some of the issues being raised at those meetings? I presume PESCO is perhaps featuring and, as Ms O'Connell has already said, a connection deficit between EU institutions and citizens. Perhaps Ms O'Connell will give a summary of the issues raised within the citizens' dialogues.

Ms Noelle O'Connell: I thank Deputy Haughey for his very warm words on this very cold day. We are grateful for his support.

I shall first address the Vice Chairman's question on transparency and accountability at Council level and the issues coming up in the citizens' dialogues. It is very interesting that one of the topics and themes emerging through the debate is the continued desire and interest of citizens to have greater accountability and transparency across all levels and across all the different institutions. Citizens have not focused on or mentioned the Council specifically but there has certainly been the interest, the wish and the desire to see continued efforts in promoting accountability and transparency across the different institutions, regardless of which institution it may be.

We would absolutely agree with Deputy Haughey that Brexit has been a wake-up call. It is interesting to see, across the different citizens' dialogues - so far we have been to Galway and Cork - that a desire is expressed to have better communications by our Government and the EU Parliament around the various European Union initiatives at play in Ireland and how they affect all our lives as citizens. The main topics and themes emerging are on the areas of security, climate change, the Erasmus programme, the rural-urban challenges and how to promote and develop Ireland's infrastructure. PESCO has also featured. The debates are very lively, robust and well informed.

We model the example of the Citizens' Assembly. People are seated at tables and they go through a series of five topics. The participants' pack will be given to this committee for reference. The groups of participants discuss each of the topics in detail for ten minutes and their views are then fed back to the wider group. It is certainly an interesting and lively debate. It is very encouraging to see the level of commitment and engagement by people. The meetings take place after work on cold evenings at 6 p.m. and we do not allow people to leave until they are all talked out at about 8.30 p.m. or 8.45 p.m. The level of commitment, debate and dialogue is really encouraging. People want to have their voices heard on what Ireland's relationship with the European Union should be like. We are delighted to see that people are inputting in to this continuing process. We shall garner all the views and feed it back in to the Parliament and to the Government, in order to shape and influence Ireland's position on the European Union as we face the future.

Vice Chairman: I thank Ms O'Connell very much. I just want to let the witness know that this meeting is going out live on the worldwide web at the moment. There may be many people at home today who are watching and who are interested in this subject. I am aware that European Movement Ireland will probably use this in its own information pack.

Ms Noelle O'Connell: Absolutely.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: The Vice Chairman will forgive me for being late this morning. Getting out of my driveway was the problem. Once I was on the road it was easy

enough to get in. I am sorry I missed the presentation. Ms O'Connell speaks of providing factual information which is a really important aspect when considering the future of Europe. It is great that the roadshow is going around the country, engaging with people and listening to their concerns. It brings Europe down to the ground to the people who have an interest in it. The EU is currently under threat.

The European project that we know and love is under threat and I believe that the threat is not as great from Brexit as it may be from misinformation and migration. Let us deal with both of these separately if we can. On misinformation, the key thing coming out at the moment is Ireland's membership of PESCO. I am not sure if this is what European Movement Ireland is hearing around the country. I hope to join the citizens' dialogue in Donegal on 8 March. I would like to attend at least one of the meetings in rural Ireland to hear what goes on.

The notion of a European army is being bandied around the place. None of the people who speak against PESCO speak of the fact that it is a menu of choices. None of the people who speak against it speak of the fact that our nation could not possibly afford either the investment or resources to protect ourselves, for example in the area of cybersecurity. I do not believe that any EU country, apart from Germany or France, could fund that type of protection.

The benefits from PESCO are massive. With regard to defence in the State, I try not to use with word "defence" when we talk about PESCO and I try to only talk about security. When one mentions defence in Ireland people immediately think of uniforms, boots, guns and all that goes with that. As a small, open economy the capacity of the Government to negotiate deals for the purchase of hardware is a significant factor. There is a benefit in becoming part of a collective. Has there been any positive information on the ground around the benefits that would accrue from PESCO as against the downside?

I shall now turn to migration. We all want to play our part when it comes to refugees. The EU has mistakenly identified the crisis the Mediterranean Sea as a refugee crisis. Do not get me wrong, I am very supportive of free movement across the world and not just across the EU, but I believe there are those who are sitting in very poor circumstances who will nearly all have a television set and a mobile phone. They can see the relative luxury in which we live in the western world. Some people in Ireland, however, might not agree there is luxury living but when we compare it to where some others live, it is luxurious. There is a natural desire to come here and to sup at that well.

We have to find a way within the EU system to facilitate the movement of economic migrants. Has there been any discussion or debate at local level on that, especially around the notion of short-term visas for three to five years to allow people to come and pick up a skill set and then move back to the country they came from? We know that education raises the economy in every country. Those people who would come to the EU to get specific skills could go back home and raise their own economies. Has there been any discussion on Europe's role, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and north Africa? Europe needs to take a proactive role in building those economies. By that I do not mean giving moneys to military juntas and the like but we need to be proactive in terms of education and encouraging companies that relocate in those countries to invest in them. I have raised on many occasions at this committee the massive multinationals that have moved from Ireland to cheap labour economies. Are any of us paying any less for their products now that they have moved to a cheaper manufacturing base? We are not. What are those multinationals doing with their super-normal profits? They are skimming them off and keeping them. Tens of billions of euro and dollars are being held. Is that an issue people around the country are talking about in the debates Ms O'Connell organisation has arranged? I

commend her on what her organisation is doing. It must be tough at times facing the public at these debates. I apologise for being late and I thank Ms O'Connell for her commitment.

Ms Noelle O'Connell: I thank Senator Craughwell for his comments. We were also slightly impacted by the sneachta on the way here. The Senator certainly hit the nail on the head on the defence issue. I can only speak about the Connacht and Munster debates that have taken place so far. When we bring together a group of approximately 100 people from across the different provinces at each venue, we try to split them up in order that they engage with people they do not know. There are a diversity and plurality of views, even among the smaller groups of eight to ten people around the tables on topics, including those of the PESCO defence and security. That reinforces the complexity and the nuanced nature of the topics people are discussing.

The responses have been very nuanced across the two dialogues that have taken place to date. I remember the people at one table during the debate we had in Cork were fully in favour of there being greatly increased collaboration on security and defence issues and were fully behind Ireland's position on PESCO whereas the table next to them, table F, were completely against it. The level of debate on that issue was interesting. Certainly, some people are calling for a rethink on the issue, which is also interesting. There were calls for an evolution of Ireland's traditional long-held position on neutrality, while at the same citizens' dialogues people were very strongly of the view that this position must be maintained and upheld regardless of the challenges. The issues of cybersecurity and terrorism were also discussed. We noticed the complexity and nuances of the views at the debates we have had to date.

The Senator's point regarding migration and the visa process is interesting. It has been encouraging that a mixture of people have attended these dialogues. It has not only been citizens from Ireland. Citizens from different EU member states and further afield have come along and inputted in the engagement on how they view Ireland's relationship with Europe and the way they want it to develop. The gatherings have been very diverse and multicultural and that has enriched the dialogue, debate and also the discussion and the findings. We have noticed that there is no one-size-fits-all view. I am sure members of the committee could attest to that being the case. There is no one view on any one particular topic. If we have 100 participants at a debate, I can guarantee we will have 100 different points of view, which is to be commended.

The Senator is right in pointing out that it is not an easy task to moderate this engagement. My colleague, Ms Nora Trench Bowles, is involved on the communications and multimedia side. She probably has a harder job than I do. The hardest job I have is to make sure people do not go over the allotted time.

The Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, county councillors, Members of the European Parliament, MEPs, and Members of the Oireachtas have attended these dialogues and are to be commended. We appreciate the support and any assistance members of the committee can give us. We would love to see the Senator Craughwell at the debate in Letterkenny next week. Hopefully the snow will have thawed by that stage. We are hoping for a good turnout in Ulster and the north west. We believe such dialogue is extremely important. This is an important body of work. The depth and intensity of the dialogues and debates taking place are affirming and enriching. People are very engaged and that is to be commended.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Has anybody put forward the thesis that Ireland is not a neutral country? We are not a neutral country. We are militarily non-aligned, which is vastly different from being neutral. If we were a neutral country we should probably be spending around 10% of our gross domestic product, GDP, on armaments alone to keep our country safe

and neutral. We are militarily non-aligned. The constant claim regarding our neutrality is beginning to wear on me. There has never been a law passed on neutrality. There is nothing on the Statute Book on neutrality. We are simply militarily non-aligned. Has anybody raised that issue?

Ms Noelle O'Connell: Yes, absolutely. People are certainly talking about that issue. Other people want us to remain neutral as they see it, while others have a different view and would say that as we live in such an increasingly interconnected and complex geopolitical world, we need to examine our security and defence and to be more closely integrated. That is certainly a point of view that has come up in both the debates we have had in Galway and Cork to date. There is not one particular viewpoint on any of the topics but that is to be welcomed. I am sure our report will be short and concise. We will do our best.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank Ms O'Connell.

Vice Chairman: I thank Ms O'Connell and her colleagues for coming in here today in these difficult weather conditions. I thank Ms O'Connell for sharing her analysis and thoughts and for engaging with us on this very important topic. She has given us a number of matters to think about and we very much appreciate that. We will certainly incorporate those in the reports we are preparing and on which we are working at the moment. Her organisation deserves great credit for the work it is doing. It is much easier for her organisation to operate in this area than it would be for a State Department because her organisation is independent and non-political as this dialogue is being done on a movement basis. I know from arrangements made by previous committees that we toured different parts of the country, but it is more costly and difficult for this committee to do that because we have a larger operation. Ms O'Connell's organisation is doing the State some service. I thank her and her colleagues for coming in and wish them a safe journey back to their place of work.

Ms Noelle O'Connell: I thank the Vice Chairman.

The joint committee went into private session at 10.48 a.m. and adjourned at 11 a.m. until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 7 March 2018.