

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ AN AONTAIS EORPAIGH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN UNION AFFAIRS

Dé Céadaoin, 26 Meán Fómhair 2018

Wednesday, 26 September 2018

The Joint Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy David Cullinane,	Senator Paul Coghlan,
Deputy Bernard J. Durkan,	Senator Gerard P. Craughwell,
Deputy Seán Haughey,	Senator Terry Leyden.
Deputy Helen McEntee (Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade),	
Deputy Mattie McGrath,	

DEPUTY MICHAEL HEALY-RAE IN THE CHAIR.

General Affairs Council: Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Chairman: As we have a quorum, we will now begin in public session. We have received apologies from Senator Richmond. I remind everyone to switch off their mobile phones.

I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee, her officials and those in the public Gallery to this meeting. Today is European Day of Languages. It is important to celebrate the diversity of Europe's languages and cultures. In that context, it is nice to have people in the Public Gallery from many different places.

Today we will engage with the Minister of State on the work of the General Affairs Council, GAC, following last week's meeting in Brussels. I thank her for her attendance. I also thank her for her contributions yesterday evening to the debate in the Dáil on Brexit and related issues. We always find these engagements on her work in the Council and the big strategic issues facing European Union useful. I am sure there will be lots for the members and the Minister of State to discuss as we have not met since before the summer recess. I note that the Council had further discussions on issues of particular interest to this committee such as the rule of law in Poland, the next multi-annual financial framework, MFF, and, of course, Brexit. There has been a great deal of discussion on Brexit in the past week, in particular following the meeting of the GAC and the informal European Council summit in Salzburg. This is important and we must keep sight of these issues and stay at the top of our game.

As a Member of these Houses, the Minister of State is well aware of the rules on privilege so I will not read them to her. I invite her, without further delay, to make her opening statement to the committee, after which there will be questions and contributions from committee members.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Chairman and committee members for their invitation to this meeting. It is important that we meet every few months because it give us an opportunity to engage on the relevant issues. I join the Chairman in acknowledging the importance of languages. Having spent the past year engaging with students, universities and with our European colleagues, I recognise that the development of languages in this country is important in the context of strengthening those relationships.

Before we get into the detail of Brexit, the MFF, the rule of law, migration and many of the other issues on the agenda, I would like to pause to remember a dear friend and colleague, the ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, H.E. Petrus Kok, who unfortunately passed away recently. His death was sudden and it was a shock to many people. He was very much loved and admired. He was someone I got to know in recent months and I found him to be enthusiastic and dedicated to his job and to representing his country. I offer my condolences to his wife and children. Our thoughts are with them at this difficult time.

I will start with the issue that is uppermost in everyone's mind at the moment, namely Brexit. Negotiations resumed on 16 August following a short summer recess and have been going on continuously since then. EU leaders reviewed progress during the informal European Council summit held in Salzburg last week. As President Tusk made clear in his remarks following the summit, all partners were agreed that there would be no withdrawal agreement without a solid, operational and legally binding Irish backstop. Leaders reaffirmed their full support for Mr. Michel Barnier and his efforts on this, including his efforts to de-dramatise the

backstop. A legally operable backstop which avoids a hard border and protects the integrity of the Single Market is essential to agreeing the withdrawal agreement so as to provide certainty that no matter what the outcome of the negotiations on the future relationship, there will not be a hard border on the island of Ireland.

It is imperative that the UK in these final stages of the negotiations engages with the issues identified in the protocol to try to achieve progress by the October European Council. The UK has provided a guarantee on avoiding a hard border. It has made this clear commitment a number of times and it has agreed that a backstop must be included in the overall withdrawal agreement. There are now just weeks left to deliver on these commitments and to conclude the overall agreement. We encourage the UK to come forward with those proposals.

Despite what some people might think, the European Council meeting on 18 October remains the target to achieve maximum progress and results in these negotiations. At that meeting, Ireland and its EU partners will then decide if conditions are sufficient to call an extraordinary summit in November to finalise and formalise the deal. Progress on the backstop will be an essential part of that decision. If there is nothing to deal with at the October meeting, it is hard to understand what we would discuss at another summit at a later date.

Time is running short. As the Taoiseach said again last week in Salzburg, we need to redouble our efforts over the coming weeks to ensure we can successfully complete negotiations and agree a deal. In this regard, it is welcome that last Friday, the UK Prime Minister, Mrs. May, promised to come forward with proposals on the backstop. These proposals should be tangible and should be tabled urgently so that the negotiating teams can engage constructively on finalising the legal text of the protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland.

In addition to our ongoing and intensive efforts to secure a good outcome for Ireland from the negotiations, the Government has been responsible and measured in its approach to preparing for Brexit. Our work has intensified in recent months and is well advanced. A whole-of-government response is being taken forward through the cross-departmental co-ordination structures chaired by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade with the Minister, Deputy Coveney, at the helm. As well as the work at home, this helps us engage actively with the European Commission's Article 50 task force and its Brexit preparedness unit on areas where the lead policy role lies with the EU. Last week, the Cabinet approved the latest phase of this preparedness planning relating to staffing. This included the phased recruitment of 450 additional staff, expected in 2019, including additional customs, veterinary and food safety inspectors. This follows from Brexit-preparedness measures, focused on east-west trade only. This was agreed at the last Cabinet meeting in July.

Contingency planning for a no deal outcome, bringing together the detailed work being undertaken by individual Ministers and their Departments, was identified as an early priority and is well advanced. It has focused on the immediate economic, regulatory and operational challenges that would result from such an outcome. It looks at all the possible outcomes ranging from what we hope will be the closest relationship to a possible no deal scenario.

All the efforts I have described have been undertaken in parallel with a nationwide public information and outreach campaign, entitled "Getting Ireland Brexit Ready", which was launched last week by the Tánaiste, together with the Ministers, Deputies Humphreys and Creed. The campaign has two main aims. The first goal is this is a whole-of-government communications effort, using online resources and outreach activities to build public awareness of implications from Brexit in areas such as access to goods and services, travel and other areas,

and the practical steps that can be taken to prepare in each case. The second goal is to build further awareness among the public and businesses on the steps being taken by Government, and the various financial and other supports that are available to them to assist them in their Brexit preparedness.

Government agencies and Departments have been running events throughout the country for some time. Next week on 5 October, the first of a series of governmental information and outreach events will be held in Cork. We are keen to work with the committee on these outreach events and the Tánaiste is in the process of writing to all of committee members and others to ask for their assistance in sharing details of these events with constituents more broadly. We want as many people as possible to attend and be aware of the supports and information that is available. The Chairman's help with that would be greatly appreciated.

This work will continue and intensify in the coming months. The Brexit negotiations are still ongoing, which means there are many uncertainties. However, irrespective of the outcome, change is coming, and through our communication and support efforts, we are making every effort, online and otherwise, to ensure that the citizens and businesses are as prepared as they can be for when it happens.

Last week the GAC, which I attended, debated the MFF for the period 2021 to 2027. As the committee knows, the Commission tabled its proposal for the next MFF in May and the individual legislative proposals for CAP, Cohesion, Erasmus and Horizon Europe followed in the subsequent weeks. The Commission's proposal is for a modern, simplified and more flexible budget of the order of €1.135 trillion, equivalent to 1.11% of the EU 27's GNI.

The scale and complexity of the EU's budget mean that the negotiations will take time and effort. The Austrian Presidency has set a challenging pace. Sectoral councils and working groups have begun examining the individual proposals that make up the substance of the budget. A specific working group is looking at the structure of the budget and how it will be financed. A Presidency questionnaire was circulated to member states in July for completion by September and those responses formed the basis of a Presidency report that was presented last week. The focus at the GAC was on the two questions of whether the MFF proposal reflects EU policy priorities and European added value, and whether those priorities are reflected in the proposed allocations of EU funds.

As expected, such broad questions drew a broad range of responses, reflecting a variety of views around the table. In my intervention, I welcomed the work to date and encouraged the quick pace and agreement in 2019. I said that I believed our policy priorities are reflected in the budget but that they need to be adequately funded. In saying that, I was minded of course of the CAP, where we do not feel the right balance has been reached yet. Expenditure on agriculture helps support 44 million jobs throughout the EU, representing just under 20% of overall jobs. It contributes to rural sustainability, food security, animal welfare and environmental standards, all of which are clearly in the interests of the EU and provide European added value. We know that every penny invested in rural communities has a ripple effect, nearly tenfold in many communities.

The CAP post-2020 is presented with new and upcoming challenges particularly in the areas of the environment, climate change, biodiversity and health. The new CAP proposals make it clear that European agriculture needs to bring a stronger focus to the protection of the environment. Supporting farm incomes will be central to achieving this objective. There is growing support for the proposal to make provision for the restoration of the CAP budget for the 2021 to

2027 period to current levels. Up to 20 member states have joined this alliance and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, is pressing that case in the Agriculture and Fisheries Council.

At the GAC, I also welcomed investment in research and innovation to help the EU economy to keep moving with the fast-paced challenges in the global economy. I welcomed the focus on young people with a greatly expanded Erasmus programme and particularly the suggestion to double spending on young people. Finally, I reminded Ministers that the budget needs to be flexible to deal with potential negative impacts of Brexit. We do not know what the consequences will be, but it is important that that is part of the overall psyche of the budget.

As I have said previously at this committee, the MFF negotiations will be particularly challenging for Ireland. This is the first time we will negotiate an EU budget without a British contribution. It is also the first time Ireland will be a net contributor from the outset. As our economy recovers and grows, while it is positive, it means that our contribution to the EU will also grow in tandem with that. In recognition of the broader value of our EU membership, the Government has stated that Ireland is open to considering an increased MFF contribution, but we can only do so provided that our core interests are met and European added value is ensured. The GAC is likely to return to this every month when we meet. We will have much more to discuss in the coming months around this committee as well.

On the rule of law, since taking office in November 2015, the Polish Government has passed legislation making changes to the country's judiciary. These changes, in particular those to the composition and functioning of Poland's Constitutional Tribunal and Supreme Court, have prompted considerable protest and criticism. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union sets out the values upon which the Union is founded. These include the rule of law. Article 7 of the same treaty sets out a mechanism for determining whether there is a clear risk of a serious breach by a member state of the values referred to in Article 2.

The most recent developments are as follows. In July, the European Commission launched an infringement procedure regarding the law on the Supreme Court, which changed the retirement age of judges. The Commission maintains that this law undermines the principle of judicial independence and is therefore incompatible with EU law. Separately, on 6 August, the Polish Supreme Court applied to the Court of Justice of the European Union, ECJ, for guidance on five provisions in Poland's new supreme court law. A preliminary ruling from the ECJ on these elements is expected in October.

In August, the European Commission sent a reasoned opinion to Poland, the next step in its infringement procedure on the supreme court law. Poland issued a communiqué on 14 September stating it has comprehensively addressed the Commission's concerns regarding compliance of the supreme court law with EU law, which it considers groundless. The first judicial appointments under the supreme court law have been made by the Polish President, with ten judges appointed to join the newly created disciplinary chamber of the supreme court. On 24 September, the Commission decided to refer Poland to the ECJ due to the violations of the principle of judicial independence created by the new supreme court law. The Commission also asked the ECJ to order interim measures, restoring Poland's supreme court to its situation before the new laws were adopted. An expedited procedure was requested in order to obtain a final judgment as soon as possible.

Ireland has consistently supported the Commission on this and we have emphasised that dialogue between Poland and the Commission needs to result in substantive outcomes that

address the concerns that have been identified. We know dialogue has continued between the Commission and the Polish Government at various levels and the issue has been discussed by Ministers at the GAC at successive meetings this year, including two detailed hearings on the issue at the Council in June and again last week, when the Commission provided useful updates. We had meaningful engagement between Poland and other member states. The Council may return to the issue for a “state of play” at its meeting next month in Luxembourg. Earlier this month, the European Parliament adopted a reasoned proposal, inviting the GAC to determine whether there is a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the EU is founded. This is likely to feature on the agenda for the next meeting of the GAC as an information point from the Austrian Presidency.

As members may know, migration dominated the discussions at the European Council in June and there was another lengthy session on the issue at the informal summit in Salzburg last week. The Austrian Presidency has highlighted this as a key priority and been holding bilateral meetings with member states. It will present a progress report on the issues discussed in June at the European Council next month. These include regional disembarkation platforms, “controlled centres” and reform of the common European asylum system, especially the Dublin regulation under which asylum applications are assessed in the member state where the migrant first enters the EU. Ireland is keen to find a consensus based on a balance of responsibility and solidarity and, with respect to the proposed platforms and centres, one which respects international law and the standards of the UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration.

Ireland has played a constructive role by opting into relocation and resettlement measures, by contributing naval vessels and by increasing our humanitarian contributions. We have shown solidarity over the summer months by pledging to take migrants from three vessels which docked in Mediterranean ports and where there was a struggle to find locations for the migrants. We welcome the renewed focus on relations with Africa as it will be crucial in the long term to address the root causes of migration. In that regard, we made an initial pledge of €3 million, then €6 million and now €15 million to that fund. The Austrian Presidency will co-host an Africa summit in Vienna in December and preparations are under way for an EU-Arab League summit in early 2019.

Before I conclude, I will comment on the referendum next Sunday in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Skopje and Athens have shown courage and leadership in reaching a deal on a new name for the state, the Republic of North Macedonia. I do not want to underestimate how emotional and challenging this issue has been for the people for many years but this is an historic opportunity, which will strengthen the case for opening EU accession talks over the coming years for the relevant countries. Turnout will be key on Sunday if the necessary threshold is to be achieved. I urge the entire electorate to exercise their democratic right and civic duty by seizing this opportunity and endorsing the deal on the name.

I thank the committee and the Chairman, in particular, for the support demonstrated for our citizens’ dialogues. I do not have time to give an exhaustive account of this initiative but I hope the date will be Friday, 12 October for the launch of our narrative report, the next milestone in the process before we submit our overall agenda to the Romanian summit next May, when the EU is expected to prepare a new strategic agenda on this.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State for her comments and for remembering the late ambassador, H. E. Mr. Peter Kok. Members and I had gotten friendly with him and saw him as a dedicated and sincere man. We remembered him last week at our meeting as we were all upset at his untimely passing. He was a young man and had much living and work left to do.

He was busy in his ambassadorial role, in which he excelled. We are genuinely sorry. I made friends with him over a long period and met him on many occasions. We had many interesting debates and exchanges and I am sorry at his passing.

Senator Terry Leyden: I welcome the Minister of State and her team, as well as the people in the Gallery. With regard to the informal meeting in Salzburg, it is disappointing in a sense that there was a certain isolation imposed on British Prime Minister Theresa May. It is important that we keep close contact with the United Kingdom during these negotiations. I accept we are one of the 27 countries but there has been a long relationship with the UK going back to the 1965 Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement signed by the then Taoiseach, Mr. Lemass, and the UK Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Wilson. That was eight years before both countries joined the European Economic Community, EEC, in 1973. Our relationship is special and there should be some consideration for a unique economic zone between the United Kingdom and Ireland because of our trading relationship, which is worth €1.1 billion per week, and because we have had this relationship for so long.

The Republic of Ireland comprises only 1% of the total population of the European Union but we are the most affected by the ongoing negotiations and Brexit. I suggest this to the Minister of State, Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and others. It seems from television reports that British Prime Minister May was terribly isolated, which I thought was unfair. It is vital we retain a strong relationship. The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, BIPA, will meet in London in October and we intend meeting the British Prime Minister there. We must relay to Mr. Barnier that we recognise the sensitivities within the British Government now and what will happen in future. There is also the question of modernisation of border controls, which may lend itself to a solution.

This is a difficult time and we are also facing into the European elections of 2019, in which our country will get two additional seats. In effect, none of the additional seats for the European Parliament has been allocated to the western portion of Ireland. It would be a useful conduit for those representing the north west and west if they take into consideration the extra responsibility they will have after Brexit. They will have to represent the interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

Senator Paul Coghlan: I welcome the Minister of State and her colleagues and I agree very much with Senator Leyden's comments about the importance of our relationship with Britain, which goes back to the foundation of the State. It includes cultural, social and business ties. I know BIPA intends to strengthen those relations but it is important that this committee should play its part, as it has done. The relationship with our British counterparts is vital, and we are organising some visits. I thank the Minister of State for her comprehensive overview. We look forward to keeping in touch.

Chairman: I understand the two Senators are caught because of the vote now taking place in the Seanad.

Deputy Seán Haughey: The Minister of State is down to her final member. The 3.30 p.m. start probably did not suit us on this occasion, as there is much happening in the Houses today.

I thank the Minister of State for her comprehensive briefing on the issues of the day in regard to the European Union and note her comments on Brexit and the backstop. I agree that if the Taoiseach could improve his relationship with the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Theresa May, it would be helpful. That said, we are all singing from the same hymn sheet on Brexit

and wish the Minister of State, Deputy Helen McEntee, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste success in the coming weeks as it is in all of our interests. I also note the Minister of State's remarks on the multi-financial framework and the emphasis the Government is placing on the Common Agricultural Policy.

I raise the issue of migration which seems to be one of the biggest challenges facing the European Union. I note Mr. Donald Tusk's remarks at the informal meeting of the European Council and call for a constructive approach to resolving the migration crisis and a broader vision of partnership. Migration is the crucial issue, from which the Republic of Ireland is a little removed because of its geographical location. Across the European Union there has been an increase in the number of populous parties, nationalist right-wing parties and neo-fascist far right parties, which is a concern as these parties are challenging the values of the European Union. I note the Minister of State's remarks on the Irish approach in that regard. It is welcome that we are playing a constructive role because we are all Europeans. Ireland and all other EU member states need to manage diversity and implement successful integration policies. We can learn from the mistakes made by other EU member states. Integration is key. We need to play our role in the overall context. In that context, I refer to the need for "burden sharing", as referenced. Ireland is ready and willing to play its role in facing up to this crucial challenge facing Europe as a whole. We have managed the situation fairly well thus far, but we need to have a further conversation on it. When on an Emirates flight recently, I watched a documentary about the refugees who were arriving in Ballaghaderreen. While there was a lot of fear initially about the refugees being settled there, after several weeks those who had reservations had come round to the idea. The issue of migration is one on which we need further debate in this committee. We also need to have a debate at State and EU level on how we manage the migration issue which poses a big challenge.

The elections to the European Parliament will take place next year. I do not think Irish people give serious consideration to whom they elect to the European Parliament. Often candidates are elected on the basis of local or national issues. We all need to give serious consideration to whom we elect to the European Parliament in the light of the challenges facing the European Union. Ireland needs to pay particular attention to the issue of migration and learn from the mistakes made by other EU member states. Migration is an issue that is not going to go away.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Seán Haughey for his contribution. Next week the committee will consider the subsidiarity report of the task force established to examine whether changes were needed. Has the Government considered the report and, if so, what is its position on it?

There are many other issues of importance to people in Ireland. I am sure the Minister of State is acutely aware of the alarming decrease in the value of beef, to which I attributed to people going north for beef, but it has since dried up. According to reports I received last Thursday and Saturday from various marts in my county, the prices being paid are shocking at a time when farmers are in desperate need of an income to pay for winter fodder. Farmers are really concerned about the future. There are other contributory factors. While the good weather during the summer was welcome, it has resulted in problems for the farming sector. I attended a meeting earlier today of IFA representatives from all around the country. Many of those who made presentations raised similar issues of concern about the forthcoming budget and, in particular, the impact of Brexit on the farming sector. As the Minister of State will be aware, the farmers of Ireland are very resilient and always up for a challenge, but there are only so many fights one can fight. When one is surrounded at all corners, it is harder to fight. At this time of year many in the farming community are trying to sell weanlings to have income for the

winter. For those with suckler cows, this is their time to make hay, but the prices they are receiving at marts are abysmal. Prices are on the floor and farmers are losing on each animal they sell. Keeping them is not an option because farmers need an income. Also, the cost of keeping animals inside for the winter in terms of the cost of feed and so on would be problematic. I consider myself to be an optimistic, rather than a pessimist, but I do not see how prices can improve. Previously buyers from the North came South to buy animals, but that is no longer happening. If there are only a couple of buyers at the mart, it is a buyer's market. That is what is happening to farmers. If this is happening before we have exhausted the Brexit negotiations and have any knowledge of where the deck of cards will lie and so on, I am fearful for the future of the farming sector. I acknowledge that it is only one sector of Irish society, but I am speaking about it because it is to the fore of my mind following the excellent presentations other members and I heard earlier during the meeting with the IFA. I am not sure if the Minister of State attended the meeting. The sector is in crisis even before the Brexit negotiations conclude and we have a plan, or we do not. We are in uncharted waters and to say we are worried is an under-statement. The tourism sector will also be impacted on.

The Government is putting the final touches to the budget. The 9% VAT rate put in place by the then Government in 2011 or 2012 was hugely important to the hospitality sector in my county. I give full credit to the former Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, who at the time had the imagination and the foresight to see that it was the lifeline we required in the sector. It did work, but we have two hospitality sectors in the country, namely, the major cities and the rest of the country. One can compare the prices that are being charged in cities such as Dublin to what is charged in the rest of the country, in particular in rural areas, where they are much more reasonable and not extortionate. We are worried about the effect of Brexit on the sector, in addition to a possible change in the 9% VAT rate which might be imminent in the forthcoming budget, combined with the worry we have concerning English visitors who were always welcomed by the hospitality sector and who mean so much to it. We do not want it to be considered a them and us type of situation. They are our nearest neighbours and whether they were from Wales, Scotland or England, we appreciated their custom in spending their hard-earned money coming here on holidays. We were always pleased to have them and to welcome them here. We always felt they appreciated their time here with us but the current message is that tourism from those areas could be affected by Brexit and the associated currency difficulties. Those are some of the hot topics I consider to be facing us.

I invite Senator Craughwell to make a contribution before the Minister of State wraps up.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I am terribly sorry for missing the contribution of the Minister of State, as I had a delegation in and I was unable to extricate myself until now. I have one issue of concern. First and foremost, I compliment the officials who are working throughout the European Union on Brexit and have done an incredible job. Everywhere I have been in Europe I have heard about the Irish problem, the Irish Border and other issues concerning Ireland. Our officials are working overtime, as are the Minister of State, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney.

My one concern is the hard Brexit we all hear about. The day after the referendum in the UK I wrote about the need to manage the Border. Nobody on this island, North or South, or in the UK wants to see a border. Nor does anybody in Europe want to see a border, but the way things are going it is just possible that we will end up with a border nobody wants. I have spoken in recent days to a number of people living north of the Border and all of them are really afraid of the consequences if that happens. They said they will move to the South. I am full of

confidence that things will work out the way we expect but I would like to hear whether we are putting contingency plans in place to manage a border.

As was said by one of our colleagues in the UK Parliament, the Labour Party shadow secretary, if one puts a camera up somebody will shoot it, pull it down or break it so somebody will have to mind the camera and the moment one does that one will have to put somebody there to mind the person who is minding the camera and then the situation will snowball. I made that point two years ago when I wrote the piece on the Border. If we finish up with any sort of monitoring we will have a border. We only have two barracks left, one in Dundalk and one in Finner Camp in Donegal. We have closed all of the other military barracks and we have no military presence north of a line between Dublin and Galway. We have depleted our Defence Forces in close proximity to the Border and we have closed all of the police stations. I was in Blacklion last weekend. It is a ghost town. My concern is whether we have contingency plans in place. If the Minister of State replies that she cannot say, I will understand that as well because I realise we are talking about a very sensitive issue. I would welcome the views of the Minister of State.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will reply to the questions in reverse order and respond to those who are present. In response to what Senator Craughwell said about a hard Brexit, we are doing everything in our power to avoid that. It is the last scenario we want to happen.

In terms of contingency planning, we are planning and we have started recruitment. Last week the Cabinet gave approval to begin recruiting approximately 450 staff, which is very much focused on an east-west basis to deal with additional customs, veterinary and food safety inspectors at airports and ports, but it is only on an east-west basis. When we say that we cannot countenance the return to any kind of border, whether it is with checks, barriers, associated checks or barriers, non-tariff barriers or whatever else, we mean it and that is very much the position we have taken. It is on the basis that the UK and the EU have given that same commitment and the fact that it is so intrinsically linked to the Good Friday Agreement which has been signed by all three parties. What we must do now is do everything in power, intensify our efforts, double our negotiation efforts and try to make sure we reach a deal, or as much as we can by the October deadline, which allows us then to finalise something in November if there is to be a meeting then.

We are still going through the subsidiarity report. I will come back to the Chairman on that. I will refer to a few points he raised, some of which have more of a local and national element. The budget will take place in the coming weeks and whatever will happen in that regard will happen. In terms of tourism, the ability of people to travel freely on an EU-wide basis is one of the significant benefits of the European Union. Following Brexit, approximately 450 million people will continue to be able to travel to Ireland, experience it and enjoy it. Hopefully, the UK will continue to enjoy such access as well. As part of the overall withdrawal agreement, we have agreed with the UK that the common travel area will continue, as it predates membership of the EU for both countries and allows for citizens of both countries to travel freely from North to South and east to west, including to Scotland and Wales. That is something on which we have worked very hard in recent months and years and we hope it will continue and that people will be able to come and enjoy this country.

Farmers have had a particularly tough year, not least with the weather. We might be able to control some things but the weather is not something we can control. I was at the IFA meeting today. I would not dream of missing it. There are a number of things we are trying to do, first in terms of the CAP. As I indicated in my submission, given that more than 80% of funding from the EU goes directly to farmers we know the benefit it has to them, their families and

communities and the ripple effect it has and we feel it is imperative that we continue to get the same level of support for farmers, which is something we are working very hard to do at a European level. In terms of Brexit preparedness, we know that from the moment the vote happened, changes to sterling and various other factors meant that certain agricultural sectors were impacted straight away, in particular the mushroom industry. Since then we have tried to mitigate the impact through budgetary and other measures. We are looking at putting measures in place post Brexit. Each Department is identifying possible challenges and what measures need to be put in place and each Minister has been asked to put an action plan in place based on the work which will feed into their work plans. From an agriculture point of view the chairman of the IFA, the fisheries board and other representatives attend a stakeholder forum and we engage with them as much as possible.

Deputy Haughey referred to migration, which is one of the biggest challenges. I agree that we are removed from it to some extent, but we do not think we should remove ourselves from the conversation and the support and solidarity we provide in co-operation with member states. The dynamic has changed slightly. The number of illegal migrants coming through the European border has decreased by approximately 95% since its peak a few years ago. What we must do now is ensure future policies will work, that they will support the people they are supposed to and that there will be co-operation among member states to implement them, which is often the hardest thing to do. As I noted, we are working on a number of things. The suggestions in respect of the disembarkation platforms are still being worked through, while there is a proposal that there be an additional 10,000 Frontex along borders. There is also consideration of the Dublin regulation and a common European asylum system to try to reform it. We will continue to support Operation Sophia and take in refugees and migrants where we can. Showing how they can integrate and implementing successful policies are very important. I do not know if members had the opportunity to attend the launch today of a book entitled *45 Stories*, a project of the European Commission in Ireland. It takes into account various projects ranging from individual businesses to the environment and elsewhere and how the European Union has supported them. The project in my county of Meath focused on individuals who had come to Ireland from outside the European Union, as well as tackling issues such as racism and workplace discrimination, among others. We need to continue working on them, while also looking at the bigger picture and supporting other member states.

Our relationship with the United Kingdom will continue after Brexit to be important and valuable. Physically, it is our closest neighbour, but it has also been our closest friend on many big issues and we do not want that to change after Brexit. The British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference met for the first time during the summer. There has been continuous engagement among Ministers on matters of mutual interest. We are looking at opening a new embassy in Cardiff and adding additional staff to the embassy in London. We try to engage as much as we can, but what we cannot do during the negotiations is engage in bilateral or side negotiations with the United Kingdom. If we were to do so, our solidarity with and position among the other 26 member states would be no more. Therefore, we need to hold firm, but that does not mean ostracising or alienating anyone. Having been in Salzburg, my view is that member states merely reiterated the European Union's position, namely, that we cannot break up the Single Market, that there are elements of the Chequers paper that would work and others that would not. From an Irish point of view, we merely restated our position that there could not be the reimposition of a hard border on the island of Ireland. We cannot predict how that came across or how it was portrayed. What is important is that we work together, that the United Kingdom bring forward its own proposals that it states it has and that we try to reach an agreement.

Senator Terry Leyden has raised the matter of a EU-UK economic zone before. To me, it suggests Ireland is different from the rest of the European Union. I do not think that is something at which we should look. Our trade with the United Kingdom is significantly higher in agriculture, but our overall trade is less than 16%, whereas last year our overall trade with the European Union was almost twice that figure, at 33%. We need to be very strong in our commitment to the European Union, while trying to secure the best possible outcome overall.

On the redistribution of seats, a process was undertaken. I understand the northern constituency lost two counties and did not gain a seat, but the southern constituency gained two counties, while the constituency of Dublin gained another. I do not know where the challenges and uncertainty surrounding the position of Northern Ireland may have fitted into it.

I thank members for their support and engagement. Our focus is on Brexit and trying to secure the best possible outcome. We continue to work on everyone's behalf in order that there will be as little disruption as possible to people's lives, their businesses and communities and that ultimately we still have a strong relationship with the United Kingdom from which we can move forward.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. I neglected to say earlier that there had been a very interesting showcase earlier in Leinster House celebrating 45 years of our membership of the European Union. It was great to see a gentleman by the name of Michael explaining how he had benefited from the cross-border health initiative, whereby he had been able to have a bionic arm fitted following a very serious accident. I know it well from sending patients to the North. Last week we sent a group of 14 and I have another 14 read to go in less than ten days. We will not go into the ins and outs of why we have to use the initiative, but it is great to have it in place. Where we will be with it after Brexit is a worry. Will the service still be available for us and will we be able to avail of it? No one can yet answer us. That and other questions are still up in the air, but we will carry on the work.

I again thank the Minister of State who is always readily available to come before the committee which is appreciated by members. I also sincerely thank the departmental officials, the unsung heroes in this battle. They are working hard and diligently to try to ensure we will secure the best deal possible for the country and the people. Their work may not be acknowledged every day by politicians, but I want to do so today on behalf of the committee. I hope this message will be relayed to them because a great effort is being put into solving the problems and difficulties we face.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I will not put the Minister of State on the spot today, but I raise an issue I would like her to address the next time she attends the committee. The land bridge may prove to be a problem post-Brexit. When Michel Barnier met the Chairman and the committee, he said funding would be available for the development of a high speed, super highway connecting Ireland and mainland Europe through Zeebrugge, Cologne or Roscoff. Is that something the Government has examined in its contingency plan?

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is an issue that has been raised continuously. While we cannot deal with some future relationships, we can discuss the challenges, of which the land bridge is particularly notable. The European Commission, the United Kingdom and member states are well aware of it and trying to address it.

On the overall budget, with our colleagues in Belgium, we have referred to the need for flexibility, perhaps in the next multi-annual financial framework, to deal with some of the chal-

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allenges presented by Brexit, depending on its outcome, in the countries that may be impacted on more than others. That is something that is being considered. With aviation, it is a significant issue.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the Minister of State.

Chairman: I, too, thank the Minister of State.

The joint committee went into private session at 4.30 p.m. and adjourned at 4.45 p.m. until 12 noon on Tuesday, 2 October 2018.