

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ AN AONTAIS EORPAIGH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN UNION AFFAIRS

Dé Céadaoin, 14 Samhain 2018

Wednesday, 14 November 2018

The Joint Committee met at 2 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan,	Senator Paul Coghlan,
Deputy Seán Haughey,	Senator Terry Leyden,
Deputy Mattie McGrath,	Senator Neale Richmond.
Deputy Frank O'Rourke,	

DEPUTY MICHAEL HEALY-RAE IN THE CHAIR.

Committee of the Regions: Discussion.

Chairman: We received apologies from Senator Craughwell. I remind people of the mobile phone notice and ask them to ensure their phones are switched off. I am delighted that today we are having an exchange of views with the Irish delegation to the European Committee of the Regions. I am delighted to welcome all the members of the Irish delegation to that committee who have joined us, including the head of the delegation, Mr. Michael Murphy, as well as Mr. Kieran McCarthy, Mr. Jerry Lundy, Mr. Gerry Murray, Ms Deirdre Forde and Ms Mary Freehill. As a committee, we have made a concerted effort to engage with those who represent Ireland in the different European institutions or those originally nominated by Ireland but not serving the European Union directly. This is vital and a key part of that picture is the European Committee of the Regions, so this is a very important engagement. I appreciate that every one of the witnesses is very busy in different roles and I appreciate them taking the time to be here today, as I know committee members do as well.

Before beginning I remind everybody of the rules on privilege. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against any person outside the Houses or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. By virtue of section 17(2)(f) 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 are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I ask Mr. Murphy to give his opening statement. We will have a fluid arrangement and if people wish to interject, we will have an open conversation if that is all right. We need not be too formal or regimented about it.

Mr. Michael Murphy: On behalf of the delegation, I thank the committee for the invitation to address it today. I am accompanied by my fellow Irish members of the delegation, including Ms Freehill, Mr. McCarthy, Mr. Murray, Ms Forde and Mr. Lundy. We have apologies from Mr. Hughie McGrath, Mr. Enda Stenson and Ms Kate Feeney, who could not be with us today. I acknowledge the presence of Mr. Jim Conway, director of the eastern and midlands assembly; Ms Sarah Holden, the national co-ordinator for the delegation; and Dr. Michael Brennan, our EU affairs officer. Without their support we could not work effectively as a unit.

I will share the opening statement with two of my colleagues. I will provide an overview of the current mandate of the Committee of the Regions, the work that has been undertaken by the Irish delegation and the priority issues for our regions. My colleagues, Mr. McCarthy and Ms Freehill, will then speak about two of the current priorities for the Committee of the Regions and their relevance for Ireland, the future of regional policy and funding in the post-2020 period and the findings of the Report of the Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing Less More Efficiently”.

At the outset of its current mandate the Committee of the Regions identified five political priorities to guide its work. These priorities include recovery following the financial crisis and ensuring that growth is spread evenly across regions and developing trust in the EU at the lo-

cal level and in supporting a dialogue between the European institutions, citizens and local and regional authorities. Events of the past four years, including the UK's decision to leave the European Union, the rise of populism, and the continuing concern regarding the lag in public investment illustrate that these priorities remain very relevant today. Irish regions share the same concerns as our European neighbours, whether it is access to broadband, support for new businesses and small and medium enterprises or the question of how regions can retain young people and develop sustainable communities, whether in busy urban areas or in rural and peripheral regions. However, with these challenges come opportunities to develop new responses and better ways of working. In seeking to engage local communities in the debate around the future of Europe, the Committee of the Regions has organised more than 180 citizens' debates at the local and regional level. The delegation was proud to support one of the first of these debates in Cork in 2016 and members of the delegation have since taken part in similar local discussions with Committee of the Regions colleagues in France, Lithuania and Germany. I am due in Germany again before the end of this month. One common message that has emerged repeatedly is the need to improve our communication about the work and the opportunities of the EU but also how the EU and member states can better include the local and regional level in the policymaking process. Ms Freehill will touch on that also in her intervention.

Currently, the Committee of the Regions agenda is focused on the proposals for the multi-annual financial framework and in articulating the needs of regions for the next financial period of 2021 to 2027. The Committee of the Regions is working with regions from across Europe, including our own regional assemblies, in demanding that Cohesion Fund policy, including the European Regional Development Fund, is stronger, visible and available to every region in the EU in the next funding period. I recently had the pleasure to serve on the jury for the European broadband awards, which will be presented later this month. In assessing the applications, it was clear that in many cases EU regional funding and support was a key driver in increasing access to broadband in rural and peripheral regions and it is important that this support remains available. In Ireland, we now have a unique opportunity to consider how this support at the European level can also be aligned with the development of the regional, spatial and economic strategies.

All this future planning must be seen against the background of UK decision to leave the EU and its possible impact. Within the Committee of the Regions, the Irish delegation has been vocal on the challenges this poses for our local communities and the need to ensure that adequate planning and support measures are in place. As the committee saw itself with the visit of the Committee of the Regions conference of presidents, it is recognised that our regions will face the biggest impact outside of the UK. The delegation continues to work with other Irish representatives in Brussels to present a co-ordinated position and to emphasise the difficulties that Brexit poses at the local level and the need to ensure that co-operation with Northern Ireland and UK regions continues in the future.

As members may be aware, the Committee of the Regions mainly presents its views as detailed written opinions in response to legislative and other proposals from the European Commission or from requests from the Council and Parliament. To date, Irish delegation members have completed seven opinions, with an eighth by my colleague, Ms Forde, scheduled for adoption in December. In line with the priorities outlined above, our members have focused on issues of interest for Ireland's regional development and our local communities. Councillor Enda Stenson's work on the smart villages initiative promotes the opportunities for creating sustainable and digitally connected rural communities. Councillor Jerry Lundy's opinion on the action plan for a maritime strategy in the Atlantic area focuses on how we can best support

our maritime communities to maximise the opportunities of the blue economy. Councillor McCarthy has concentrated on the potential of both the digital agenda and the urban agenda to support the development of our towns and cities, while Councillor Forde's opinion on the proposed single market programme considers how the EU can best support our SMEs in the future. My own opinion has considered the impact of the EU's competition policy on our regions. Of course, I cannot forget our first opinion of this mandate on trade policy, which was completed by Senator Richmond, the then-head of the Irish delegation. My delegation colleagues will be happy to speak on any of these topics in more detail as part of our general discussion.

Mr. Kieran McCarthy: As Councillor Murphy has noted, we as a delegation and as members of our regional assemblies - I am a member of the southern regional assembly - are fully supportive of the Committee of the Regions's campaign to ensure that regional development funding remains available to all regions in the EU. I will focus particularly on the proposals for the future of European territorial co-operation, ETC, better known as INTERREG. As a key support for European regional development, INTERREG continues to open vast possibilities to forge beneficial links across Europe and allows the free flow of knowledge and experience between regions and cities to the profit of all. For the current funding period INTERREG has been allocated €10.1 billion, distributed across all 28 member states and several non-EU countries. Ireland is involved in nine co-operation programmes, three transnational programmes, three cross-border programmes and two co-operation programmes. INTERREG programmes have directed hundreds of millions of euro to Ireland. In the current period ETC funding has reached approximately €169 million, which is an enormous amount of money. Funds are applied to a huge range of areas, including innovation, entrepreneurship, environment, education, skills, urban regeneration, cultural heritage and rural development. Significantly, INTERREG funds are available to all types of stakeholders, from city councils to community groups, and is one of the most accessible EU funding streams.

The Irish regions have had a key role in terms of INTERREG. Our regional assemblies are contact points, advising on application for ETC funds, and assessing project proposals to ensure high project standards. Additionally, the regional assemblies facilitate access to ETC funds by aligning their regional spatial and economic strategies, RSES, which align to the broader national planning framework which has progressed through Dáil Éireann over the last few months.

The uncertainty around future UK participation in INTERREG threatens to undermine the current range of programmes in which Irish regions and local authorities are involved. This is a major concern as we look to the post-2020 period. We know that it is proposed that PEACE, the Northern Ireland reconciliation programme, will continue as PEACE+, expanding its remit to incorporate some of the Ireland-Northern Ireland-Scotland programme. Beyond this, the questions around the future programmes are more concerning. We do not yet know what impact Brexit will have in our regions. We appreciate the support of the various committees we are involved with in seeking to ensure that Irish regions and local authorities continue to have access to programmes that relate to our geographic and economic priorities.

More broadly, post-Brexit it is imperative that funding be made available so that all county councils and local authorities can recruit and expand EU funding teams. There should be an EU funding officer in every local authority. We have heritage officers and arts officers, so there should be an EU funding officer. It will also be even more important to maximise the potential of the Committee of the Regions, in terms of the opinion documents it produces, to access best practice solutions and increase awareness of the Irish Regions in Europe.

Councillor Freehill will now speak about the outcomes of the recent task force report on subsidiarity.

Ms Mary Freehill: The recent Task Force Report on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing Less More Efficiently” emerged as part of the debate around the future of Europe. One of the three questions posed by President Juncker at the outset of the workforce’s work was to consider the involvement of local and regional authorities in the preparation and follow up of Union policies. Councillors Murphy and McCarthy have mentioned the importance of communication, both in communicating the opportunities of the EU but also in ensuring that there is a mechanism to feed back the perspectives of local communities via the local and regional authorities. This is a key message emerging from the report, in terms of the development and preparation of legislation and in assessing the impact of this legislation at the local level. This is not just a challenge for the EU institutions, but also at the national level in member states. Surveys of the Irish population show a high level of positivity towards the European Union, but this is not something that should be taken for granted. Ireland’s role within the EU will also continue to develop and change as we face into a new budget period as a net contributor, and in a European Union without the UK as a member.

At the local level we are aware of how certain legislative measures can prove contentious. In this context, the report’s recommendation that the European co-legislators host hearings with local and regional authorities as part of the legislative process is to be welcomed. Similarly, the delegation welcomes the aim of improving the flow of feedback and viewpoints from local and regional authorities through public consultation questionnaires, and the role that the Committee of the Regions can play in supporting this. The report is sensitive to the fact that different governance structures exist across the member states. It is important to focus on what is possible within our own local regional government structures in Ireland. As such, I would like to draw the attention of the committee to the report’s recommendations in relation to the European semester and the need for both the European Commission and the member states to engage meaningfully with local and regional authorities in this process. At present the delegation is consulted in the preparation of the national reform programme, but we would argue that there is considerable scope to intensify this engagement. As mentioned previously, the three regional assemblies are currently developing their regional spatial and economic strategies. These strategies will provide the link between our national planning framework and county-level planning. Members of the committee will be aware, and recent EUROSTAT research confirms, that disparities continue to exist at the regional level in Ireland. This regional structure provides a new opportunity for Ireland to more actively involve our regional and local authorities in the preparation of the national reform programmes. Such engagement would also present an opportunity to increase awareness around the importance of the European semester process more widely throughout the country. Our attendance here today is a positive example of how we can share information and experience, and the delegation hopes that we can continue to build on this in the future.

Chairman: I thank Councillors Murphy, McCarthy and Freehill for their opening remarks.

Senator Neale Richmond: I am delighted to welcome the delegation back to Leinster House. I appreciate the three councillors’ contributions on a series of key areas.

Given the day it is, I wish to pick up on a topic Councillor McCarthy raised. Almost all of the delegates are members of the Brexit interregional group in the Committee of the Regions, which doubtless has a vital role to play. I appreciate from experience the strong relationship between members of the Committee of the Regions from Northern Ireland and the delegation

from Ireland. It is a powerful relationship, especially as the two who tend to attend the most are from unionist communities.

Regardless of what happens today or whatever deal happens, we must look towards the future and see the potential for the Committee of the Regions to push the agenda of furthering Ireland's ties with the rest of Europe. It will become increasingly important, and we have seen this in areas such as logistics, where we are opening up new shipping lanes to Santander, Rotterdam, Zeebrugge and Duisburg, as well as energy connectivity with the Celtic interconnector between France and Cork.

We must consider the issue on a local and regional level. Once upon a time on county councils, we talked about twinning but during the austerity years, that developed a bad reputation. It is important, however, and it has potential. There were many historical reasons for my old local authority being twinned with Holyhead and Cherbourg in France, which made sense when a ferry used to depart from Dún Laoghaire but it does not do so anymore. There is no active twinning in progress with any other EU member states despite the fact that Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown is not only an historic area but also a major commercial hub for the Sandyford business district as well as Dundrum Town Centre. How can the Committee of the Regions best encourage local authorities in Ireland to engage with the other 26 member states to develop new twinning associations for our towns and our counties, as well as a regional link? Some of the relationships we have with American cities and so on make a great deal of sense, but much more needs to be done.

Councillor Murphy described the travelling he has done, and I know it is the same for every one of the nine full members and nine alternate members. Twinning is important and full of potential. Europe is so much closer than we think. If we take Horizon 2020 and ERASMUS Plus as examples, the deep roots of future relationships between our third level institutions and our civic society with European partners can, and will, come from our local authorities. It will not come from central government or the agencies such as Léargas which implement these programmes. Rather, it must come from the European officers that Councillor McCarthy mentioned. I hope that the local authorities in turn put resources behind the European engagement officers at a local authority level. I am not just saying that somebody should be designated as a European engagement officer even though he or she has 17 million other jobs to be doing.

There is great potential in this regard. Will the delegates tease it out for the committee?

Senator Terry Leyden: I extend a warm welcome to our colleagues on the Committee of the Regions and thank them for their work. As this meeting is being live-streamed and they can obtain copies of their contributions to the meeting, it is a great opportunity for them to show what they are doing in Europe. As they will know, it is hard to get that message across in the media. So many things are happening that it is hard for the media to concentrate on the councillors' work as well as other issues.

We are in a vacuum of sorts today because it is an historic day. As we speak, the British Cabinet is meeting at 10 Downing Street, and its decision is vital to the Brexit discussions. I am optimistic that the cabinet will agree to these terms, which are good from the United Kingdom's point of view. What is good for the UK will be good for us too, and it is vital the UK gets a good deal. All of our diplomats and the Government are working hard, and there is a total united approach to the talks in Ireland, or at least in the Republic of Ireland. The Government has the full support of all the Opposition parties, Independents and everyone else that we get the best deal. We are singing from the one hymn sheet and we have the green jersey on. Given their

work in Europe, the councillors will recognise the diplomatic support that represents Ireland. The top diplomats, from the ambassador to all his staff in Brussels, have worked closely with Mr. Michel Barnier to get the best deal. I am conscious of that and we are fortunate to have that type of relationship.

From the point of view of the Committee of the Regions, there will be a change from the end of March one way or another, when the UK leaves the European Union. There is no likelihood of another referendum. We in the committee have travelled extensively, for example with the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs and the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, and the signs suggest that the UK will try to make the best of its current situation, which the people decided. Going back would be fraught with danger and I do not see it happening. The next step will be the British Government putting it to the parliament. The Taoiseach announced earlier that the Dáil will also have a say on the final agreement, but it will be guided by the recommendations of the diplomats and the Government.

When these negotiations are completed, it is important that we have direct access to the land bridge through the United Kingdom into mainland Europe because it is the fastest way to mainland Europe, aside from direct links. The use of the tunnel and land bridge is the quickest way to get our product onto the markets in Europe. I have been involved with the National College of Ireland to devise technologies that could allow for a seamless transfer of goods from the Republic through Britain without obstruction. We are working on it and we are meeting the Customs and Excise tomorrow to put forward a proposal. I am sure other people are also working on it, and the more people who work on these solutions, the better. There are technological solutions, through knowing what goods are on the trucks going through the land bridge, and they will prevent delays. It cannot be that fresh meat from Kepak in Athleague will be held up in Dover before it is sent abroad. Much work, therefore, needs to be done.

The councillors' work will now intensify to a degree. The committee has a particular interest in Northern Ireland because it is in Europe to represent Northern Ireland's views. There will be no representatives from Northern Ireland because its equivalent committee will be gone, as will its MEPs. The work of the Committee of the Regions based in the Republic, therefore, will be extended. I hope its activities in Europe will be fully funded for the future because of the additional responsibilities it will have.

Councillor Murphy said support is forthcoming for regional funding for broadband in rural areas. Will he elaborate briefly on that? A report on the ongoing negotiations for the extension of broadband in rural areas is anticipated. The best people to carry out the extension are the ESB and, possibly, Eir and Bord na Móna. State agencies are required. I greatly regret that Eircom was sold to the private sector, and we have never needed it more than we do now, but that is life. If I was in a position of power, I would buy the company back and take over its infrastructure. In the long term, it would be the best approach because it has the infrastructure to provide broadband in rural areas, as does the ESB. Technology has improved. Previously, one could not put broadband wiring on the ESB lines but circumstances have changed slightly in that regard.

I thank the witnesses for attending. We have had regular meetings with the Committee of the Regions and I hope they will continue to take place more often in the discussions that will follow the outcome of the Brexit discussions.

Chairman: I welcome Deputy Mattie McGrath, who was chairing another meeting. Apologies have been received from Deputy O'Rourke, who had to leave to attend to Dáil business.

I invite Councillor McCarthy to respond to the Senators' questions.

Mr. Kieran McCarthy: I compliment Senator Richmond on his work. He was a very effective member of the Committee of the Regions. I am delighted he is also a strong member of this committee.

Chairman: I also compliment the Senator on his performance the other night.

Mr. Kieran McCarthy: Yes, on Monday night. It was fantastic.

Chairman: He was not merely good, he was excellent.

Mr. Kieran McCarthy: Yes, definitely. There is much to learn from Europe. As councillors, we have been put in a position where we have had to learn about European policy. We have been projected, as it were, from the ground to the top. We are trying to develop a bottom-up process in that it cannot all be top-down thinking from the European Commissioners. Many opportunities come to mind. I mentioned only an EU funding officer and INTERREG.

I and many of the members of the delegation represent the Committee of the Regions. We deputise for the Committee of the Regions in cities and regions across Europe. Suddenly, we have to put on an EU hat but I cannot put on a Cork City Council hat. I am a member of the e-government steering board, which is engaged in developing a smart Europe, smart cities and digital devices. We are also examining broadband issues and cities also require the necessary infrastructure and g-technology. Apart from INTERREG, we have Horizon 2020, and Ireland has one of the most successful rates of acquiring Horizon 2020 funding in the EU. The success rate is of the order of 6% and Ireland is well ahead in that respect.

I am involved in the European entrepreneurial region award I know the people from Tralee, from the Chairman's neck of the words, were involved in developing the INTERREG programme. They were very successful and were part of the secretariat driving the INTERREG programme.

I am also involved in the EU urban agenda in respect of which I am involved in overseeing 12 actions plan. They are trying to develop action plans covering everything from employment action plans to housing action plans. Recently, I brought a delegation from my city council to the European Parliament. We met representatives of the European Investment Bank, EIB, and they outlined what they could and could not do for our council. I am aware that certain bodies in my city have drawn down funding from the EIB because of our interaction with the EIB, and that also applies to other cities, including Limerick. We are involved in the new skills agenda, which is discussed in other committees of these Houses. In terms of the European capital programme, I am a member of the jury on the European volunteering capital. There are also the areas of sports and youth. Galway will be the European Capital of Culture in two years time. There is also the European capital of innovation award. It involves more than merely twinning. There are many opportunities into which we are deeply diving. The opinions in this context are major toolkits for how we can advance our cities and regions. From a rural development perspective, we are championing the Cork 2.0 Declaration 2016: A Better Life in Rural Areas. We try to make sure that our rural regions are looked after. We are not only examining one or two elements but are deep diving into 14 or 15 elements at any one time and trying to get the best out of that. We are doing a good job but we need more support to get the message across that all these opportunities are available.

Mr. Michael Murphy: I thank Senators Leyden and Richmond for their interventions. I

commend Senator Richmond on the excellent work he is doing as chair of the Oireachtas Brexit committee. I also commend this committee on its work, which has been part of a co-ordinated approach taken particularly in terms of the first phase, which involved creating an awareness throughout the EU 27 of the unique challenges Ireland faces. That co-ordinated approach was taken by the Heads of State, this committee, our members of the European Parliament, MEPs, our national Government, and by us as members of the Committee of the Regions at sub-national level. It is important to highlight the incredible work being done by our permanent representation in Brussels in keeping us all very well briefed. I assure this committee that, as members of the Committee of the Regions, we are very active within our political groups, commissions and the wider committee. We have adopted a number of resolutions and, thanks to the members of the Irish delegation, the Irish concerns around protecting the Good Friday Agreement in terms of the challenges we face from a trade perspective, given the level of trade intensity many of our regions have with the UK, are at the front and centre of those resolutions.

As the committee will know, I was here for the Conference of Presidents in May of this year. As a delegation, we have engaged directly with Michel Barnier. We have been very active in creating such awareness. We have moved beyond that now and the focus is on finding solutions, notwithstanding the fluid nature of where we are at currently in terms of developments in the past 24 hours. As members of the Committee of the Regions, we have brought our knowledge back to our local authorities. We have introduced debate within our county councils around Brexit and not only by way of notice of motions around the normal day to day challenges we face at local level in terms of investment, roads and water services. We have brought the debate on Brexit into the chambers of our local authorities and they have reacted. I am aware Tipperary County Council is very active in having Brexit seminars and working closely with the local enterprise offices. I highlighted on the last occasion I was here the key role our local enterprise offices have to play and the supports national Government has provided them with. It is extremely important that as many businesses and small and medium enterprises, SMEs, as possible are aware of and use those supports to improve their competitiveness, finance, attendance at trade shows and online presence because that is as much as we can do at present. I had a Brexit dialogue in Clonmel in the past two months. It was organised in collaboration with the local chamber of commerce and attended by 300 representatives from business and the agri sector. We are very active in bringing that debate at European level back into the chambers of our local authorities. At the Committee of the Regions level, we prepared a territorial impact assessment, which very much mirrored the Copenhagen Economics report commissioned by our Government. Irish regions will be the those most impacted by Brexit as well as our agri-food machinery, wholesale, medical device and pharma sectors. A great deal of good work is being done. Currently, it is about creating that awareness and highlighting the important role our local enterprise offices have to play.

A good question was asked about broadband. There has been much talk of it and everybody in this room is well aware of high-speed sustainable broadband being a driver of economic growth in rural and peripheral regions and an enabler of distance working, with people being able to work at home rather than commuting to our large urban centres. A significant portion of ERDF moneys have been promised for the national broadband plan. I thought the figure was €75 million but my colleague has advised me it could be more than that. There has been much delay in the implementation of the national broadband plan. As I highlighted in an opinion on competition policy, we need greater flexibility in state aid rules when it comes to the roll-out of broadband. When the national broadband plan was launched in 2012 it was very difficult to define an intervention map on the one hand and at the same time technological advances are very fluid. We need greater flexibility in the application of State aid rules and, hopefully, that

is a lesson that has been learned.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I welcome the members of the delegation and compliment them on the work they are doing in liaising with their colleagues in Europe. The importance of that work needs to be emphasised. It is extremely important for parliamentarians and local authority members across Europe to interact with each other in order to be up to speed on what affects them in their own place. That gives them an opportunity to draw comparisons, and I know the members of the delegation are doing that. Instead of isolating themselves from the rest of Europe and withdrawing into their respective corners, they have done the opposite. The Committee of the Regions, in general, has done tremendous work in bringing to the attention of all the authorities the importance of equal participation and co-operation. The benefits of remaining in the EU have been well and truly discussed here and elsewhere. I am sure they have been discussed among the various council groups as well. Maybe we have come to realise the importance of what we have. Possibly we have also come to recognise the cost of achieving what we have achieved. It did not happen overnight. It was not simple. It happened over many years and with substantial costs. The Europe that is presented to us today is a far cry from the Europe of 1945, when previous experiments had gone wrong and a price had needed to be paid by millions of people. It is no harm to reflect on that now.

In the context of the debate we have had over the past couple of years, it is no harm to reflect on the importance of the North of Ireland and the South of Ireland to each other. I am not talking about the North or the South overcoming the other or subsuming the other. I am talking about the North and the South co-operating in joint activity and trade and commerce and moving as a single unit. As the witnesses will be aware, that has been a feature of the debate to date. I hope that will continue to be the case. If we are to be truly representative of the island of Ireland, those of us on this part of the island must be absolutely familiar with the concerns of our colleagues in Northern Ireland. We must be equally committed to ensuring the spirit and the letter of the Good Friday Agreement continues in place without interruption.

This is a time for reflection on the degree to which we have co-operated in the past with our colleagues across the Irish Sea. We should also bear in mind the importance of the single economic entity that exists and the common travel area. We hope that as a result of recent discussions, the future in that area will be guaranteed. We sincerely hope so. I believe that even if there is a temporary hiccup, eventually wiser heads will prevail and we will reap the rewards of the foresight and thinking of those who foresaw the development of Europe from the ashes of the past, who looked into the future and who made the necessary sacrifices and commitments.

There are challenges all over the globe now. I have always had a feeling that every 100 years or so, people across the globe become restive, begin to covet what others have and wonder how better they can get on at the expense of others. These discordant notes are arising throughout Europe and throughout the world at the present time. They are not consistent with peace, co-operation and peaceful coexistence. On every occasion in the past when this kind of discordant activity arose, there was a huge price for everybody to pay. We know the witnesses have been doing their part to ensure discordant and unhelpful voices are addressed, if not necessarily confronted, in a way that makes them hesitate and ponder where they might go next. We compliment them on that.

Senator Paul Coughlan: I welcome the witnesses and salute the work they are doing. I jotted down a few words as I listened to Mr. Murphy's opening remarks. I would be interested to hear more from him on his engagement at local level on the all-consuming topic of Brexit.

Mr. Murphy also mentioned the rise of populism. I would be interested to hear how the witnesses have noticed this in their communities. Is it a matter with which they will individually have to deal in next year's elections?

Reference has been made to villages. We have some beautiful villages, but I often think we are generally lacking in this regard compared to villages in places like the Cotswolds and parts of France. I would love to hear from the witnesses on that. The Government needs to do more to assist local authorities to make further improvements to villages.

Obviously, the Irish authorities have links with their counterparts throughout the Continent. I would like to hear more from the witnesses about the umbrella bodies that I presume they deal with.

Senator Leyden mentioned the link between Dover and Calais. It was amazing to hear the UK Brexit Secretary say the other day that he had discovered the importance of that link for the first time. The way things are going, when there are closures on the French side, lorries will back up to London. It is crazy. As the witnesses will be aware, 80% of Irish exports to continental Europe go through the Dover-Calais route. They have to go through Welsh ports first as part of the landbridge, which is absolutely vital.

I suppose we will be hearing more today, tomorrow and next week. We need to live in hope. We also need to plan for the downside.

Chairman: I will bring in a few people who have not yet spoken.

Ms Deirdre Forde: It is a great pleasure to be here and to listen to the words of wisdom. It is great to have a two-way flow of communication. The importance of being able to counteract negativity in relation to the EU, even at local level, has been mentioned. Deirdre Clune, MEP, and I had a grassroots engagement in Cork in July of this year. Unfortunately, it was the hottest time of the year. It is not easy to bring people to public meetings in such circumstances. It struck me that people were delighted to be asked for their opinions on what they like and do not like about the EU. Everyone who spoke wanted stability, which is fine. Obviously, everyone was concerned about Brexit, justice and social cohesion. I was able to relay that back to the EU. As a result, I was asked to speak in Helsinki a week ago. Those involved wanted to know what specifically we are doing in Cork and across the country about climate action, and what we need from the EU to help us. It is very significant that we can hone in on specific issues of concern to us. Some local authorities are starting to communicate what supports are available from the EU in this area, whereas others have a little homework to do. That is where we come in. We are now discussing the RACs with the regional authority. We can articulate that the Government and the EU are making a lot of funding available and that such supports should be disseminated through the regional assemblies down into the local authorities. If we are not at the starting gate, we will lose out because the money will follow the policy.

In short, I think we should be having more dialogue with people because they teach us. They learn from us and we learn from them, and barriers are broken down. In my experience since becoming a member of the Committee of the Regions, small business people, teachers and gardaí are the same in every country. They want peace, stability and jobs. The local authorities have an issue with going to China and the US to build a context for jobs and businesses. We have to look more to Europe as we continue to try to match our businesses with businesses in the other 27 member states.

Mr. Jerry Lundy: It is a great pleasure to be in front of this committee to hear the comments of members. We are working with the Committee of the Regions to address many of the issues that have already been mentioned, including broadband and Brexit. The committee is working as an Irish team at EU level to represent our country and speak on behalf of regional assemblies and local county councils on issues that are relevant to local and regional authorities. We give regular updates on the work we are doing.

I would like to comment on some of the issues that have been raised by Senator Leyden. Broadband is a significant issue in rural areas. I had the great opportunity of bringing in an opinion on the mid-term review of the Atlantic strategy, which involves creating sustainable jobs in coastal regions. Young people in coastal regions in Ireland and throughout Europe are drifting into major urban areas. It was discovered during the course of the research I was doing that every year, 50 million people move from rural areas to urban areas. The effect is that, by 2050, the United Nations predicts that 68% of the world population will live in cities. That is unsustainable. Through the Committee of the Regions and my opinion which has been adopted by it, we are trying to create sustainable communities in coastal, island and outermost regions. If, owing to the lack of broadband and good infrastructure, young people continue to drift into urban areas and cities, we will lose heritage in these coastal regions. We will lose our folklore and possibly our language and skills and, if that happens, all of the other services that are available such as schools, football clubs and post offices will close and we will have an entire generation that will have been removed from these areas. It is not just happening in my home area of County Sligo, it is also affecting regions in France, Spain, Portugal, Scotland and Wales. Of course, we are going to lose the United Kingdom, one of the great maritime nations. We will lose its skills in boat building from the European Union, which will create problems for us. I see the problems Brexit will cause in County Sligo, a Border county from which so many cross the Border into Enniskillen to work. People from Enniskillen come to Sligo and Manorhamilton to work and there are also cross-Border health issues. I live in Tubbercurry which is exactly halfway between Enniskillen and Galway. So many people are going to the new hospital in Enniskillen to access health services, which will create problems.

I thank members for their comments. As an island nation, North and South, we must work together in friendship. I hope the news that will come on Brexit will be good for the country.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I thank the delegation for coming. It is important that we have this dialogue and I thank the delegates for the work they are doing in pushing forward the Irish issues in the context of Brexit and with the people they meet in the course of their work. I thank them for the reports they have outlined for us. They will probably agree that the Committee of the Regions is the institution about which citizens know the least of all of the European institutions; therefore, we need to gain more recognition for the important work it does.

On the Multi-annual Financial Framework which was mentioned in the presentations, unless I am mistaken, there was no reference to the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. I would have thought that the future of the CAP was extremely important for the regions and this country, in particular. I know that the Taoiseach has said we intend to increase our contribution to the European Union; therefore, all of these issues have to be sorted out, but perhaps the Committee of the Regions might confirm its position on the CAP.

On regional and local government generally, in the course of its work and interaction with other delegations from throughout the European Union, does the Committee of the Regions consider local and regional government to be poor in this country? Is there a need for reform or give it enhanced status? I accept that this is a small country compared to some of the big

EU member states and their populations, but presumably the Committee of the Regions would state there was much more regional and local government could do in the interests of citizens.

On the future of Europe, I know that the President of the European Commission has put forward various scenarios, but I want to broaden the debate and take up the point mentioned by my colleague Deputy Durkan. Immigration is one of the big issues facing the European Union, not so much this state but other nation states. As a result, there is populism and the rise of the far right and so on and a decline in European liberal democratic values. That is one of the biggest threats to the European Union at this time. Have the delegates come across this in the course of their work? Does it impact on the Committee of the Regions? How does it affect its work and how can it counteract it?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am also delighted to welcome our guests and thank all of them for the work they have done on a continuous basis. Much of it is coming to a culmination in what we are expecting to emerge from the Cabinet meeting across the water, but I will be parochial, even though I do not like doing so. I know that all councillors and members have done huge work, but I compliment my local man in Clonmel, Councillor Murphy, on the leading role he has played and the work he does on a continuous basis in the county council on behalf of his constituents and also at the Committee of the Regions. I compliment him on the valuable work he has done and the wonderful seminar he organised. Councillor Forde said it had been held in Cork. He waited until the weather was a little cooler, but there was a full house and he had the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney as a guest. I know from the Chamber of Commerce in Clonmel that there was very positive feedback from it. Many of us have been preaching and talking about Brexit for so long, but it was consultative engagement with the very people who would be affected, namely, business people. They were asked how they might be affected and in what way they felt Brexit would impact on them. I know that the seminar was very beneficial and I received excellent feedback from it, even though I was not able to attend. It is important that we talk about this issue and take notice of the bottom up approach taken in consulting and sitting down with the Minister who was dealing with it, on a 24-hour basis at this stage. There has been great feedback and only time will tell what will happen. I know that these are anxious times and look forward to meeting the Taoiseach later this evening on behalf of our group for a briefing.

Councillor Murphy also mentioned the Competition Authority in the report of the Committee of the Regions. Perhaps he might expand on what he meant when he said he felt a lot of things could change and that there could be a better appreciation of how quickly things had evolved with the Internet and social media. Perhaps he might expand on how he thinks we are in a sticky wicket in the provision of broadband and ten to 15 years too late. As he obviously has an insight into the matter, he might expand on his views and explain what he meant.

The Committee of the Regions has been very beneficial. It has done excellent work and is important because its members are working at local level and understand business. I know that Councillor Murphy is involved with an important business in County Tipperary in his day job. I welcome all of the delegates. I am sorry for being parochial, but the work Councillor Murphy does is appreciated by the council, the chief executive, the members and, above all, business people in County Tipperary.

Mr. Gerry Murray: It is great to come before Oireachtas Members and flag some of the issues facing all regions in Europe. Sometimes we think we are living in isolation in rural Ireland, but, in fact, many regions throughout Europe are facing greater and bigger challenges than we are. Entire towns and villages have emptied in Spain, France, Bulgaria, etc. We have

met people and officials from these communities and they just say it was a litany of small cuts, with police stations, post offices, banks and shops being closed. It then comes to a tipping point which one official described as “a run on the banks.” It is hard to imagine a vibrant community could die so quickly, but that is what is happening. For example, post-2020, in the north-west region, huge tracts of rural France and Spain will be in transition. That means that all of the statistics are indicating that all of these rural regions are not progressing and that they are moving backwards. The only thing preventing the north-west region from going back to objective 1 status is the repatriated profits of some of the multinational companies, which are overinflating the gross domestic product, GDP, *per capita* in the region. Without these, we would have objective 1 status again. We have a serious crisis in rural Ireland. As Councillor Lundy noted, the demographic is changing dramatically. There is a major flight from the land and a low number of young farmers taking on their family homesteads and continuing the tradition of farming. As Deputy Haughey said, the CAP is crucial in respect of all of those issues.

The feedback from the rural regions of Europe is that tourism, the Common Agricultural Policy, the LEADER programme and various other initiatives are not sufficient to reverse the decline. What these regions need is a front-loading of infrastructure to attract investment and employment. Tourism, to a large degree, is the icing on the cake but only accounts for 5% of GDP in Ireland. We need to ensure policy addresses the other 95%. A problem we have encountered in meetings with officials in Brussels is that they are quite happy to front-load money into the regions but only in circumstances where the respective nation states are prepared to match it. Unfortunately, many European states are not prepared to step up to the plate with matching funding. Perhaps members could deal with that issue.

Senator Leyden referred to a land bridge to the United Kingdom. In the west, half of the western rail corridor is open and the other half is closed. This is a low carbon, tariff-free and low cost route into Waterford Port and out to the European mainland with its market of 500 million people. The route was nominated for trans-European transport network, TEN-T, funding in 2011. The Government took it off the agenda in 2014, despite Europe making available 50% or 60% grant aid for the initiative. I hope that when the review of TEN-T starts in 2020, Oireachtas Members will lobby to ensure this section of the western rail corridor is put back on the agenda for TEN-T funding. That funding is available because rail transport is regarded as a low carbon transport initiative and ties into climate change, etc. As the UK will no longer be a common transit area post-Brexit, many multinational companies in Mayo and Galway are looking at alternative routes to the European market. The western rail corridor, from Sligo to Waterford and Cork ports, is an obvious alternative. However, it needs funding, which requires the State to nominate the project as part of TEN-T. Oireachtas Members could lobby to have the project put back into the TEN-T for funding in 2020 given that 50% of the funding would come from Europe, with Ireland providing matching funding.

The other major issue is broadband. There is a serious deficit of broadband in rural Ireland. Councillor Murphy referred to the various state aid regulations that are impeding the roll-out of broadband. It is hard for private utilities to embark on a major roll-out of broadband in circumstances where the economies of scale are acutely low. We are sometimes told at briefings of the Committee of the Regions that the Luxembourg Government or other governments are actively engaged in rolling out broadband. They do not seem to be impeded either by competition law or state aid law. The Committee of the Regions will examine the reasons local and national governments in some countries can show such latitude in rolling out broadband fibre, whereas we are told that there is an impediment.

For these reasons, it is important that we have this engagement as it allows Members of the Oireachtas to find out what impediments we are facing in Europe. It is also important that Members, irrespective of which party is in government, can bring pressure to bear to ensure major infrastructural projects are nominated in the regions to achieve balanced regional development. In circumstances where there is significant matching funding from Europe, there is no excuse for the State failing to nominate major critical infrastructure in the rural regions.

Ms Mary Freehill: I appreciate the opportunity for regional and local government to interact with this committee. Many questions, particularly from Deputies Haughey and Durkan, were about our experiences in respect of comparing of local and regional government in Ireland with the rest of Europe. When I first became involved in the Committee of the Regions in the 1990s, it was an eye-opener to realise that Ireland, below the level of the Oireachtas, has the lowest level of participation in the democratic world. The reason is that regional and local government structures are extremely weak.

To give an example, we spend about 7.5% of gross national product, GNP, at local government level. In Scandinavia, the figure is 33%. That demonstrates the difference. As members of the Committee of the Regions, we are participating in opinions on areas on which local government in Ireland does not even have a competency, for example, education, policing, health, social welfare, water and major funding for local government infrastructural projects. These areas are all under the administration of local and regional governments in the rest of Europe. Regional assemblies in Ireland only have the power to comment and do not have power to make decisions. To some extent, therefore, the power lies in the hands of Members of Oireachtas. It would be a pity and remiss of us to not make that point today.

The current discord in Europe was raised by a number of speakers and it is an issue that concerns all of us greatly. Subsidiarity is, however, bottom up and top down. The best way to keep and maintain peace is to involve citizens and make sure they know what is going on. Citizens probably do not know all that much about what is going on in Europe because information does not permeate down to them. There are many initiatives that could be taken to strengthen local government in Ireland. It would make for a much better society if citizens and local government had an opportunity to be involved. Perhaps the Seanad could play a big role in this regard in the sense that it is always open to considering opportunities. I am well aware that Leinster House is a busy place and Members have a heavy workload and little time. However, I am perfectly sure that the Seanad could be given the power of initiative in many areas, such as waste management, noise, estate management and so forth. In every other country, it is the local authorities that have competencies in these areas. Ireland is way behind with that aspect of democracy. It would be a pity not to use today's visit to highlight that issue.

Senator Terry Leyden: I have one quick point on the relationship between the work of the Committee of the Regions and the assemblies, of which most of the witnesses are members. Are the assemblies forums to which they can bring back reports from the Committee of the Regions? Perhaps we could invite some of the assemblies to meet this committee given that it embraces European affairs and the assemblies are European institutions in a sense. They are Irish institutions linked to Europe. As far as I can make out, the witnesses are the liaison officers for the three regions. With respect to the media, they can no longer afford to provide the type of coverage they provided when Councillor Freehill was previously a member. In the past, a regional meeting would have received coverage, but local papers no longer have sufficient staff or funding to cover these meetings. Local radio stations have funds but they rely on press releases and so on. Perhaps this would be a good forum for the assemblies to give their views

on their future in the new Europe after Brexit.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Mr. Gerry Murray referred to rural Ireland and population decline. This stems from economics. The economic experts will tell us that we can provide services for 100,000 people in a very small space, but not in a widely spread rural area. That is not necessarily true because packing a population into too small a space has other consequence with which we unfortunately have to deal.

Professor Caulfield in Galway was a great supporter of the concept of retaining a population in rural Ireland. Those of us who served our time as members of local authorities know that it is becoming more and more difficult to retain the population of rural Ireland because of policies at local authority level. Again, these spring from economics. All local authorities should play a role in that respect. Once the population of a rural area dwindles, services go, whether schools, police stations, post offices or banks. It is essential that we retain an upcoming young population in rural Ireland. Modern technology, such as broadband, are required to assist in this. They can be complementary to give to people living in rural Ireland a quality of life equal to or better than that of those living in the centre of New York.

Chairman: I ask each of the witnesses to make some final comments.

Mr. Michael Murphy: I will address a couple of points, specifically Senator Coghlan's comments on the rise of populism and the disconnect between the citizen and the European Union. I try to knock on doors as often as I can and when I do so I find that citizens are always preoccupied with what they perceive as national issues, job security and infrastructural deficits, for example, in broadband or roads. The irony is that the European Union plays such a key role in addressing those concerns. The issue, therefore, is to convince citizens and communicate to them at every opportunity about this important role, for example, with regard to funding for broadband from the European Regional Development Fund, ERDF. I met the Commissioner on Monday and we spoke about LEADER funding. If we had here ten organisations that had received funding from LEADER, very few of them would be aware of the origin of LEADER funding. I am often critical of local authorities because while they are well able to hand out LEADER funding, they rarely make the link between the European Union and the LEADER programme. It is incumbent on all of us at subnational level, particularly on us as members of the Committee of the Regions, to communicate to citizens a positive message about the role the European Union plays in addressing concerns that they perceive only national governments can address.

Deputy Mattie McGrath referred to competition policy, which is a bit of a hobby-horse of mine. This comes back again to the citizen. One of the benefits of Ireland's EU membership has been access to the Single Market. The Directorate General for Competition has been highly effective in ensuring fair and effective competition. When it comes to addressing the infrastructural deficit that has arisen as a consequence of the financial crisis, I am often critical. We have a big gap to bridge in the coming years and we need greater flexibility in the application of state aid rules. I believe there are solutions to the crisis with the national broadband plan, but they will require greater flexibility in state aid rules and by the Commission for Communications Regulation.

With regard to the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, there is a real challenge and debate to be had on the multi-annual financial framework. There is a challenge insofar as there will no longer be a contribution from the UK. Other challenges are migration and security. The Irish delegation has been consistent in calling for the maintenance and preservation of the CAP

budget. I acknowledge there has been 6% cut in CAP, but there are some good measures within CAP around greater flexibility for member states and for young farmers. My co-ordinator has just reminded me that we are due to debate the CAP at our plenary session in December. I assure Deputy Haughey that we will be very active in that debate and we will call for the CAP to be maintained.

Ms Deirdre Forde: Mr. Murphy stole my thunder in telling the committee that we will debate CAP at the next plenary session. We will make sure the Irish perspective is properly promoted at that debate.

There is a major benefit in promoting a one-stop-shop approach to the Single Market programme at regional level. Communication could be improved in promoting the Your Europe and SOLVIT portals, which any citizen can access and have a question answered immediately. The chain between the EU and national, regional and local governments is rusty in places. Meetings between the committee and members of the regional assemblies would be extremely beneficial in helping the committee see how the local authorities could do more. Hitherto, the local authorities seem to only be about delivering services but we are moving into the area of economic development and we have a larger role to play in responding to citizens' needs and hosting different forums that could debate issues such as climate action and what people want from their regions. We could have a co-ordinated approach to getting that message through Europe and the national assembly and back down to local level again.

Mr. Kieran McCarthy: In reply to Deputy Haughey's question on local government reform, I have been a city councillor on Cork City Council for nine years. The local property tax and income from rates are not sufficient for the council to achieve a surplus at the end of the year. We are running a deficit of €3 million or €4 million every year. Cork City Council secured €500,000 from INTERREG in the past two years. This is enough to allow the council to consider refurbishing one of our heritage assets, an Elizabethan fort. EU funding is enough to allow other local authorities to do projects on low carbon technologies, tourism and start-up growth. It is, therefore, very important to us.

Senator Leyden referred to migration and the rise of populism. We often hear about this on the Committee of the Regions. There is a narrative that the European Union is in crisis. My response is that Europe has always been in crisis. Since the 1940s, it has always been responding to different things.

To respond to Deputy Durkan, when we are on the ground and go into local regional authorities across Europe we find they are hunting for opportunities. I do not see a crisis. In Greece and Italy I have heard personal accounts of local councillors picking refugees up from beaches and burying them with their own money and ward funding. It is heartbreaking to hear those stories. All the Irish delegation can do is call for funding for migrant integration.

We have healthy competition between Cork and Kerry, Cork and Dublin, Cork and Galway and Cork and Waterford, but there are some 500 cities in Atlantic Europe that are hunting for opportunities. If we are not aware of the 500 cities in Atlantic Europe, we are not doing our jobs well.

A few years ago, the Houses of the Oireachtas had a fantastic project called the National Forum on Europe. I was the co-ordinator in Cork of a great debating competition run by the late Senator Maurice Hayes. That could be a great way to respond to Senator Leyden's comment about bringing people together.

Bringing the members of the regional assemblies was mentioned. We were brought in. The MEPs also need to be brought together, as do the members of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the staff of the permanent representation and the members of the assemblies. We are all putting on the green jersey, as one of the members of the Committee of the Regions present constantly says. We are all looking at the same topics and need to sing from the same hymn sheet. It is very important that we work together.

Mr. Jerry Lundy: I wish to respond to some of the queries raised by and comments made by the committee. To help small businesses and farmers in the outermost and coastal regions, we have been calling for simplification of the application form and dedicated funding, as opposed to funding from so many agencies, which puts small companies off as it is too laborious. To revitalise coastal and island regions, we have also been calling for the creation of sustainable jobs in these areas. I have always said we have looked down for energy - coal, gas and oil. The time has come to look up. There is lots of wind around the coast, as well as wave power. There is also sunshine from time to time. To create sustainable jobs, we need to look at these forms of energy, not follow the conventional ways of the past. It would help to keep communities in coastal areas and create jobs. We talk about the blue economy. That is the future, but we cannot have an economy without a community. The community must be there first and the economy will follow.

Ms Mary Freehill: The committee will be glad to hear that I wish to comment briefly. I wish to reply to Senator Leyden on whether we make reports at regional assembly level. Yes, we do as members of the Committee of the Regions. We also present a more detailed three-monthly report. Certainly, the members do participate and engage with us because they are very interested in what is going on. It is a great learning opportunity for a lot of them. It is also worth noting that members of the press do not come to regional assembly meetings. I do not know if the press sees that there is not much power at regional assembly level and for that reason does not participate. Perhaps that is telling us something.

Mr. Gerry Murray: On the low-carbon economy, I would like to add to the equation an opinion concerning road freight expressed before the Committee of the Regions about 12 months ago. One of the proposals is that the polluter pays principle applied to waste and water services be applied to road freight. Essentially, the European Union intends to tax road freight off the road onto rail. That is why there is significant grant aid for low-carbon transport initiatives such as rail services. The European Union is moving towards being a low-carbon economy by 2050. We also need to make sure we will be there. Every product we buy has a carbon footprint. Climate change is kicking in. It is not abstract; it is going to impact on us in the coming decades and we need to be ready to deal with it.

On populism, I note that people in this country do not even know the fundamentals of local and national government. Civics was once taught in the classroom and people knew how government worked or did not work. When they went into a polling booth, they could make an informed and enlightened decision. I meet third level graduates whose lack of knowledge of the fundamentals of local and national government might appal committee members. Last week I encountered a third level graduate who was very annoyed about a county development plan that was up for review. His group made 300 submissions, while the opposing group sent four. He thought it was like a game of football and that his team had won 300:4. I could not explain to him statutory obligations under government and EU policy, etc. That shows a lack of information, from which populism grows. I could not convince him that it did not work that way. There is a job of work to be done in the education system across Europe. We are facing a

very serious and significant crisis because a lot of these things are thrashed out on social media and Facebook. Unfortunately, that is what is informing people. There is a job of work for the Oireachtas and all of Europe to do on the issue.

Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I thank the delegates first for their work before coming here to make their presentations. I also thank them for the taking the time to come. All of their contributions were worthwhile. Councillor McCarthy spoke about the bottom-up approach and letting people in Europe know about the implementation of various programmes. There are between 400 and 600 programmes that deliver funding throughout Europe. To give a further example, we had the president of the European Court of Auditors here yesterday. On behalf of the people I represent, during the course of that engagement I outlined the effect decisions made in the European Union had on how we operated in Ireland. They affect farming, tourism and small businesses. They also affect how we get on, adapt, comply with regulations, apply for secure funding and deal with red tape and bureaucracy. I explained it in great detail, as did others who were in attendance at the meeting. Our guest told me afterwards that he really appreciated hearing it in that way, from a person living in a small community like each one of us, councillors, Senators and Deputies. I welcome Deputy MacSharry.

I passionately believe councillors' work is not thought of highly enough. I also passionately believe one of the worst attacks on democracy since the foundation of the State was the abolition of town councils. All of my colleagues know that I am not being political in saying that and I am not criticising the then Government. I do not care who was in power or who made the decision; I would have been critical of it regardless. I would have been critical of it if I had been part of the organisation that made it quite simply because I believe the work town councillors, city councillors and county councillors do is invaluable. Where I come from, town councils that were abolished such as Killarney Town Council were doing invaluable work that has not been replaced. The funny thing about the make-up of a council is that there are different people with their own life experiences and expertise. A typical example was Killarney Town Council, in which we had councillors who were specialists in one field or another. They used to come together at and bring that knowledge to their monthly meetings. It was like a group of experts coming together. They had a connection with the county council and their Oireachtas Members. They formed different tiers of support for communities. I saw the abolition of town councils as an awful attack.

I wish to express my appreciation. I know that my colleagues 100% appreciate the work councillors do, as do the delegates, particularly in their current role. I thank them for being here. We would love to engage with them for longer and I hope they do not think I am cutting the meeting short, but we now have to go into private session. We could discuss this issue until 10 p.m., not that doing so would be bad. However, we cannot do so because we have other obligations. I again thank the delegates.

Mr. Michael Murphy: As a final word, on behalf of the delegation and the team that supports us, I thank the Chairman and the Senators and Deputies who attended and held us to account. We really appreciate it. It is always a pleasure to appear before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Affairs. I thank the team behind the scenes. There was a lot of tic-tacking with Ms Heidi Lougheed. We really appreciate the opportunity to come and tell the story about our role and our impact at European level on behalf of cities and regions. The European Union is all about challenges and opportunities. The Irish delegation will always seek opportunities within these challenges and try to grasp as many as we can for the benefit of our cities and regions. I again thank the Chairman, Deputies and Senators.

JEUA

The joint committee suspended at 3.30 p.m., resumed in private session at 3.34 p.m. and adjourned at 3.55 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 28 November 2018.