

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ AN AONTAIS EORPAIGH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN UNION AFFAIRS

Dé Céadaoin, 14 Deireadh Fómhair 2020

Wednesday, 14 October 2020

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
John Brady,	Lisa Chambers,
Seán Haughey,	Sharon Keogan,
Brendan Howlin,	Michael McDowell.
Ruairí Ó Murchú,	
Neale Richmond.	

Teachta/Deputy Joe McHugh sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: We have a quorum and are now in public session. Apologies have been received from Deputy Dara Calleary. We will go into private session to discuss some housekeeping matters.

The joint committee went into private session at 9.02 a.m. and resumed in public session at 9.19 a.m.

EU Council Presidency: German Ambassador to Ireland and Portuguese Ambassador to Ireland

Chairman: I welcome H.E. Ms Deike Potzel, ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to Ireland and H.E. Mr. Miguel de Almeida e Sousa, ambassador of Portugal to Ireland.

I advise the witnesses that, by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to this committee. If they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they 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. They are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Members are reminded of the long-standing ruling of the Chair to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or any official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I invite Ambassador Potzel to make her opening remarks.

H.E. Ms Deike Potzel: May I take my mask off before I speak?

Chairman: Yes.

H.E. Ms Deike Potzel: I thank the committee for having me and giving me the opportunity to present the priorities of the German Presidency. A couple of months have elapsed but it is good to look at the state of affairs. I thank the Chairman for organising this meeting. Let me first congratulate Ireland on its new EU Commissioner, Ms Mairead McGuinness, and I congratulate her on her success.

I am very happy to have my Portuguese friend and colleague with me because for us it is very important to closely co-operate with our Portuguese and Slovenian friends as a trio for the Presidency. I am sure that we will have a chance to discuss the trio programme a bit later.

After one to two years of thorough preparation, obviously the Covid-19 pandemic has considerably impacted our Presidency preparations and the motto we chose for the Presidency is: Together for Europe's Recovery. We chose it because what we will need to manage this crisis is solidarity, a willingness to compromise, pragmatism and co-operation. The guiding principles of our programme and Presidency are that we really try to permanently overcome the Covid-19 pandemic and have an economic recovery. We want a stronger and more innovative Europe;

a fair and sustainable Europe; and a Europe of security and common values, which is also a strong Europe in the world.

Our foreign Minister said, at the start of the Presidency, that we want to be a driving force and a facilitator in building bridges to jointly make progress in this endeavour. We know that the German Presidency faces very high expectations. We are ambitious. We want to work in unity and solidarity in the remaining months as we did since July. At the same time we must remain realistic about what we can achieve in the remaining six months of this Presidency. We are focusing on nine priorities but due to time constraints concerning opening statements I will briefly talk about a few of them.

Overcoming the pandemic is central and managing the economic recovery takes centre stage. Agreeing on the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, and the next generation EU, that is the recovery fund, is very important for us. The German Chancellor, Mrs. Merkel, has often said that extraordinary situations needs extraordinary measures. We want to make sure that this happens and that the money can flow by 2021 so we are working very hard to reach an agreement with the European Parliament. So far, about seven meetings at political level have taken place. Our aim is to finalise the procedures as soon as possible. Also, we want to improve co-ordination within the EU and I am sure that the members have seen the recent developments there.

The next big issue, which is very important to Ireland, is concluding the negotiations on a future relationship with the United Kingdom. Yesterday, the Chancellor spoke at the EU Committee of the Regions where she again stressed the agreement is in everyone's interest, that the EU remains united in the fight for that agreement but that we also have to be prepared for a no-deal outcome. She stated:

We want an agreement: from the Irish point of view in particular it is extremely important. We won't let Ireland down but will continue to stick together in these negotiations. But we have to bear in mind the realities because an agreement has to be in the interests of both sides, in the British interest and in the interest of the EU's 27 member states.

Our Minister for Foreign Affairs most recently warned against a failure of the negotiations calling a no-deal outcome completely irresponsible and underlining that we want a close and ambitious partnership with the United Kingdom. Yesterday, Michel Barnier briefed the General Affairs Council on that and he will brief the European Council tomorrow and the day after. Unity remains important to us and we will keep negotiating. As members may know, Ursula von der Leyen will speak to Boris Johnson by telephone this afternoon. We will keep the process going but significant difficulties remain. Talks are at a critical stage, as our Minister of State for Europe also underlined. I will happy to discuss that in greater detail later.

I will briefly touch on a few more issues that are priorities for the German Presidency. On migration and asylum policy, yesterday the Chancellor said that we want to move forward. She spoke of our "humanitarian duty" with regard to what happened in the Moria camp. She believes it is a burden on Europe that agreement has not yet been reached and stated the Commission's proposal was well worthy of discussion. A compromise is needed, she said, and each member state will have to contribute to a fair solution. The debate has started between the member states based on the Commission proposal for a new pact on migration and asylum. We hope we can make progress and agree on that.

The next very important issue to Germany is the rule of law. We believe Europe should be at the forefront on climate protection and digitisation. Germany supports the aim of a 55% reduction in emissions by 2030. We want to work on producing climate legislation within a year. Other topics are digitisation, Europe's role in the world and the relationship with Africa, which will also be discussed at the European Council this week.

For us, it is very important that citizens are on board. That is why we pay great attention to having a conference on the future of Europe. We would love to see that conference kick-started during our Presidency but we will have to see whether the pandemic will allow us to do so. As the Chancellor said, this is an excellent opportunity to talk to our citizens about what they wish to happen in the future and how we can reach that aim. We would like it to be a wide-ranging debate on our joint future in Europe. With that, I thank members for their attention.

Chairman: I thank the ambassador and invite H.E. Mr. Miguel de Almeida e Sousa to make his opening statement.

H.E. Mr. Miguel de Almeida e Sousa: I am delighted to be back before the joint committee. During the previous Dáil, we had very close relations with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs. The committee's Portuguese counterparts paid a visit, as did the Portuguese minister of state with responsibility for European affairs. A visit to Lisbon by members of this committee was on the horizon at the beginning of this year but, unfortunately, it had to be postponed due to Covid. I hope it will take place very soon.

Relations between Portugal and Ireland are excellent and we are trying to give them more content. We are on the same side and share the same position in like-minded groups on lots of topics which tells us that there is a wide scope for co-operation in the future. The first meetings between the two committees on European affairs showed that both sides are interested in dialogue. That will allow an exchange of views and, more than that, of experience, and the opportunity for each side to present to the other one the specificities that exist on each side.

We hope that there will be an agreement with the UK. Like Germany and Ireland, we are very committed to finding a balanced agreement with the UK. I remind the committee that we are the oldest standing alliance between the UK and another country. The Anglo-Portuguese alliance dates from the 14th century. That is something that has lasted but has had its ups and downs. The United Kingdom is one of our major investors and we have a large community of British people living in Portugal, so it is in our interest to have a close relationship and partnership, but as my German colleague said, in the end there must be a fair agreement and the Irish question must not be sacrificed on the altar of an agreement. Since the very beginning, we shared the Irish concerns and that will continue.

Regarding the Presidency, I will be brief because now the system is that we have a trio of Presidencies. Slovenia, Portugal and Germany established a working programme for 18 months. It will be the second half of this year and the two semesters of next year. We identified a set of priorities which mirror a common vision for Europe. As usual, this programme is a general framework, a document that is established in broad lines and is being adapted, but there is more consensus than usual currently. I know that today my Minister will meet with his counterparts in the Portuguese Parliament to brief them on the progress that is being made and how that reflects on our Presidency. There is very intense dialogue between our government, our Minister for European affairs and our foreign Minister regarding the programme for the Presidency we are preparing, but now we have more question marks. We have a programme but we have a lot of question marks and, as usual, we are waiting to see what happens in the

Presidency and after December. I am ready to come next year - I hope it will be on a more sound ground - to tell the committee what our semester will look like.

The stage belongs completely to Germany now and Portugal is strongly supporting it because its success is our success and, as members can see, our priorities are very similar. They are in line and complete each other. Given that, I can state that the future Portuguese Presidency of the EU has established as the main priority for its semester to reinforce the resilience of Europe and to restore our citizens' confidence in the European social model, based on the promotion of a Union that is solidly anchored on shared values of solidarity, convergence and cohesion. Our action plan is structured around several pillars: a Europe of resilience and solidarity that is prepared to face future crises and the reinforcement of investment and the economic recovery will be at the core of our action. The German Presidency is developing excellent work on this, and preparing the instruments. Afterwards, we will deal with implementation and ensure that all of the innovative instruments that are needed for a successful European recovery and the reinforcement of European resilience are urgently implemented. We will be preparing conditions to promote all the initiatives aimed at mitigating the crisis impacts and to ensure a successful development of the plans for economic recovery, to promote growth and employment and to anchor the recovery on the European climate pact and digital transition.

The reinforcement of European solidarity and European shared values will be another requirement to ensure balanced European construction. We are talking about the reinforcement of democracy and the rule of law, the promotion of human rights and fundamental liberties and the improvement of the European response to emergency situations such as the ones we are facing.

Social Europe will be one of our main priorities. The development of a stronger social Europe in our economic recovery trajectory will be at the heart of the future programme of the Portuguese Presidency, which believes that in a difficult environment such as the one caused by the pandemic, it is more important than ever to reinforce the European social model as the motor for growth and to ensure that social rights are perceived by citizens as a palpable reality, a benefit deriving from Europe. We are always talking about the fact that Europe must reach out to its citizens. If they have palpable proof that it acts positively in their everyday life that will help to solidify our common project. It will entail several actions on a wide range of issues, ranging from mechanisms for the mitigation of unemployment impacts on professional formation and learning, and responding to the social impacts resulting from energy and digital transition because this crisis came at a moment when we were already seeing that the whole world was in a phase of transition and that we needed to ensure that all citizens are on board. That is even more so the case since the crisis. The situation has become more complex and we must look into it. There are also demographic challenges. A very important point that is complementary with the others is the fight against poverty and social exclusion given that now, in this transition phase, the risk of that happening has increased.

A green Europe and the pursuit of economic recovery on a sustainable basis is our second priority. We have our green transition. The other day, President von der Leyen had very nice words for the changes we made. We were very committed to decarbonise our economy and to develop renewables and clean energy and we are quite advanced in that regard. We are to the forefront in Europe and that is one area in our bilateral relations where we have lots of scope for talk and co-operation. We need to improve our capability to adapt to the effects of climate change and promote the benefits of being carbon free and having a resilient economic model. Other measures in that regard include the promotion of the European climate pact, the adapta-

tion to climate change, the preservation of biodiversity, the improvement of forests, water and waste management, to conclude CAP reform, and to promote innovation and digitalisation in the rural world, as well as the sustainable management of natural resources. This work has been started by the German Presidency and we will follow this work to which we will make our input and contribution.

For a country such as Portugal, which faces the sea, the committee will not be surprised to learn that the development of the blue economy is also a matter we hold close to our heart. This year, we were supposed to welcome the United Nations Ocean Conference but it had to be postponed. We hope it can take place next year and that not only will it be a major political event but it will also gather the environmental organisations that are active on the oceans as well as businesses at the side events.

I mentioned already a digital Europe because it is everywhere and will be important internally and externally. It will also be an important part of our partnership with Africa because we have to enable African countries to manage their own development if we are creating a partnership. I will provide more detail on that later if members want.

On a global Europe, our vision is similar to the one my German colleague expressed. Africa is important. We are committed to creating a true partnership. A summit was due to take place on this but we do not know now when it will take place. Otherwise, we hope it can be done during Portugal's Presidency of the EU. It was established that we would have a business and technological forum so that we can put those worlds in contact with each other and that directly forms co-operation in a sense. The meeting with India will also be important. There is supposed to be a meeting between the Indian Prime Minister and the European Council, which we hope will take place. There are lots of other events and international meetings that now have a big question mark over them.

I mention the political neighbourhood, the eastern partnership and the relationship with Asia, mainly China. This will be important, as will the relationship with Latin America, where we have a historical presence and of which we have knowledge. We are keen to bring the two continents closer. We also want to ensure we have a voice in international forums, namely, human rights forums and other forums that are close to the core of our values. That is where we can defend and promote those values and our economic interests. The World Trade Organization is one such forum..

Senator Lisa Chambers: I thank our guests for presenting their thoughts and ideas. It is interesting that we had just discussed some of the issues Ms Potzel outlined before she joined us. We discussed migration and the future of Europe and we are all on the same page on those matters. I would be interested to hear the ambassador's thoughts on those two issues. What are the key priorities for Germany in those two areas and what is Germany doing in terms of the future of Europe? Does Ms Potzel have any ideas or suggestions for us? We are starting to have that conversation now.

I am glad Mr. de Almeida e Sousa mentioned the blue economy. It is one of the areas where there is a huge opportunity for Ireland. We have not realised the true value of the blue economy in this country and it is a key priority for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Brexit brings this into sharp focus because it will impact that sector for us but there are still many opportunities that remain untapped. I would be interested to hear Mr. de Almeida e Sousa's thoughts on that particular topic. What is Portugal doing in this area? Does Mr. de Almeida e Sousa have any recommendations for areas we should focus on? I hope the United

Nations Ocean Conference goes ahead next year. We have to be positive that things will hopefully get back to normality.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank both of the ambassadors for their detailed presentations. There is an awful lot to cover and I have a million questions. Thankfully, Senator Chambers has asked a few of those questions so I will not repeat her excellent points.

Both of our guests mentioned Europe's place in the world. Mr. de Almeida e Sousa mentioned the eastern partnership but I want to ask about a country that is a bit closer, which is also to the east. I would appreciate the witnesses' opinions on the situation in Belarus and on the possibility of new sanctions being introduced at this week's European Council meeting. Even though it was an achievement to agree sanctions on Belarus at the last European Council meeting, I was massively disappointed at the fact that they were relatively narrow and that President Lukashenko was left off them. I know the German Foreign Minister, in particular, has been outspoken on this but I would like to get Ms Potzel's insight into what we might be able to expect in that regard.

On the future of Europe, which Senator Chambers mentioned, I would appreciate it if the witnesses could flesh out what preparations, if any, have been undertaken in their countries at a Government and parliamentary level to feed into a confidence in the future of Europe as we go forward.

I want to go back to the issue that dominates many minds in this country and across the water when we go away from the pandemic and the budget, namely Brexit. I am aware that it is not necessarily the biggest issue in other European countries. We had the fuss over the UK's Internal Market Bill being released at a late hour and it dominated British headlines. It was the third item on the Irish news but I do not know if it even registered in the news in Portugal or Germany. Other colleagues I speak to in member states across the EU have all moved on. Brexit happened on 31 January. It is difficult for a country such as this, which is so close to the UK and with a shared land border with the UK, to simply move on. I would appreciate hearing what the impressions of Brexit are in Portugal and Germany. Where do the witnesses see the potential of the future relationship between the EU and Britain? I know this issue was touched on earlier and it is vital that we have some form of a future relationship, even if a deal looks less likely at this stage. In that context, when we talk about recovery and the pandemic, what consideration can the MFF make to the impact that Brexit will have, how it can compound the economic impact of the pandemic and where that might affect the European recovery fund and the approach to Ireland, in particular?

H.E. Ms Deike Potzel: I will start by picking up on Senator Chambers's question on migration. For a number of reasons, including the refugee crisis we faced in 2015, that is a major topic for us. We need to stand together in solidarity to alleviate the burden on the front-line countries and we need to find a sustainable European refugee and migration policy. A restart is needed and that restart must be based on solidarity and on a shared responsibility, both in the internal and external dimensions. Internally, we are aiming for a common European asylum system, which ensures responsibility sharing and efficiency; curbs secondary migration; lives up to humanitarian standards and fundamental European values; and as I said, truly alleviates the burden on the front-line member states. We want to progress on those issues. The debate has started between the member states based on the Commission proposal for a new pact on migration and asylum, and we feel that it is a very good basis. As the committee will know, it is based on strengthening the externality mentioned, effective protection of the external borders and a fair sharing of the burden through a system of very effective solidarity. As for the externality

mentioned, we feel that European migration policy should strengthen co-operation and equal partnership with countries of origin and transit. We need to work even more closely with them and that it is part of the European Commission's proposal. It is a topic that we feel strongly about and we really hope we can push this process forward because it is a contentious issue that we need to overcome in unity and solidarity with one another. That is very important to us.

On the future of Europe, like many member states, we believe that European citizens, very rightly, want to have a more vocal say. We need to embrace that willingness to talk about the issues that are important to all of us and to our citizens. Hopefully, we will see the start of this soon. Most of the organisational issues, as I understand, have been cleared, although there is still an issue with the various chairpersons. Other than that, many of the basic factors have been settled and we would like to go ahead with it.

As for concrete measures in Germany, I would like to revert to the committee in writing because there are a number of issues. We have some experience with civil society dialogue formats. We have been, and remain, very impressed with the Irish model of the citizens' assembly, so that is definitely something we will incorporate in our ideas. We also have a cultural programme attached to our Presidency, known as Earth Speaker, which is meant to bring in young people's ideas about the future of Europe. It is a cultural, online format where young people can express what they want from a future Europe. It is apparently very successful. I hope many young Irish girls and boys will join in and bring their views to the table. It is a first, very important step to bring in young people.

On Europe's place in the world, I am not quite sure I completely got what the Senator was aiming at. We are very happy that we have now agreed with our European partners on the sanctions that were mentioned and that Lukashenko is now on the list. We will follow the situation very closely and react accordingly to make very clear that we have a united stance on those issues. In any event, the most important thing is that we work on a joint position and that there will not be deviation among member states. My Portuguese colleague, H.E. Mr. de Almeida e Sousa, mentioned a couple of other issues.

China, of course, is very high on the agenda and we want to broaden the consensus on a more united stance towards it too. On 14 September, President Michel, the President of the Commission, Ms von der Leyen, and our Chancellor, spoke to President Xi in an informal video conference. We are hoping for progress on the investment agreement side and we hope it will be possible for the EU-China leaders' meeting to take place in 2021. The European Council, on 16 November, will again talk about EU-China relations, which will be an important occasion to again show that unified view. More closely, at the moment we are very worried about the situation in the eastern Mediterranean. Our foreign Minister was in Cyprus and Greece yesterday. We are trying to keep a dialogue going because we feel it is of absolute importance to achieve de-escalation. It is a very worrying situation that we hope to solve rapidly.

Another issue close to our hearts, and regionally close, is that we are seeking to finalise negotiation frameworks and hold a first succession conference with, hopefully, North Macedonia and, if the necessary conditions are fulfilled, also with Albania. That is something we would like to see, and while I am not going to talk about Africa again, I would be very happy to go into more detail on that matter.

I turn to the view on Brexit in Germany and I am sure H.E. Mr. de Almeida e Sousa will talk about the view in Portugal. We have said from the start, and it is a commonly shared feeling, that we greatly regret that the British are leaving. We feel that very deeply and whole-heartedly.

We are losing a good friend, an extremely important political partner and an economic partner. There is no doubt about that. Obviously, Ireland's economic relations with the UK are closer than ours but there is no doubt it is a very important economic partner for us. That is why we need and want a close agreement and partnership with the UK. We do not want to lose it as a friend; we want to work closely with it on political issues and do not want to lose it as an economic partner. As we have said, however, we need to prepare for all outcomes and, unfortunately, that seems to be becoming even more urgent.

I assure the committee that people in Germany know about the Irish issue. There is a great deal of information about it and, whenever anything to do with it happens, one can be sure it will be in the main newspapers. It is a number one topic in the newspapers' online forums. The UK Internal Market Bill, which was mentioned earlier, was front-page news because people realise how important it is. We have said time and again that it would be very detrimental to bilateral trust and that we hope the UK will take the Bill off the table or adjust it such that it will not violate the withdrawal agreement nor break international law. The matter is talked about a great deal back home and it is very topical in all the news there. It has not been forgotten, although it comes with the notion that we have to look to the future and to move on. We have to be prepared and I think we have done a good job of preparing ourselves for, as we always say, all possible outcomes.

H.E. Mr. Miguel de Almeida e Sousa: Many of the points I had intended to make about innovation were made by my German colleague, such as the fact that the trio is working very well in the purpose for which it was established.

Senator Chambers asked about the blue economy. It is an expression that defines something that is much wider. It not only encompasses the economy. The economy influences everything, but the countries that have a coastline must adapt. Our oceans are changing, resources are changing and we must explore sustainability. There must be a debate as to how we will do that, and to ensure that we preserve our fishing industry and the livelihood of fishermen. Developments in the area of aquaculture will have an impact here and new technologies can be used to explore and define more precisely our capacities.

We will also need to explore our continental shelves in a reasonable way. The Irish, French and Spanish continental shelves are in a continuous line and the exploration of them was something we were trying to develop before Covid. There is considerable scope for co-operation on security because it is a large area and also in the area of the reasonable and controlled access to resources. The use of wave energy is also being developed.

The blue economy is reality would have been part of the UN conference on oceans. The UN Secretary General, António Guterres, is a former Portuguese Prime Minister, and someone who was very active in the area of marine policy during his premiership. It is sometimes forgotten, but there is a European strategy for the sea, which is being implemented without visibility. We should try to highlight this and show that work is being done. Developments are being made, but we should do more. Ireland and Portugal, as coastal countries, have a special responsibility and interest in developing the blue economy.

The sea represents transport, fisheries and the economy. There are many issues currently being debated such as those concerning the environment and plastic in our oceans and there is a lot of scope for us to highlight issues. The blue economy would be a good topic for Ireland to raise at the meeting in Lisbon.

Regarding Belarus, I have nothing to add to the comments made by H.E. Ms Potzel.

On the question raised regarding the future of Europe and the preparations made, like Germany, Portugal followed the Irish model on the debate with the citizens. The Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy McEntee, visited Lisbon and participated in an event. She attended the Portuguese Parliament to discuss and present, and I was impressed by what I saw. I suggested that the Irish model should be followed and it was. At the conference on the future of Europe, we need to reach out, and we should ask what we can do with what we have. We saw with the last referendum that people are growing a little tired of the rules always changing. We have a framework and we should work on it. If we need to change it in the future, we can, but for the time being, we should have a debate that is faithful to the objective, to reflect on our policies and gauge the feelings of the member states on what they would like Europe to be. If we develop the policies as we are doing now, and that have been identified by everyone, we will reach out to our citizens, which is one of the main priorities of our Presidency.

Regarding Brexit, I will tell the Senator how present the issue is in Portugal. Not a day goes by without a report on this issue. Sometimes I have to move faster than journalists because they can report on issues quicker than I can and they do not have the same things to do that I have. However, it is very much a current issue and it is something that people feel. It is not a foreign problem for them. For example, if one goes to Portugal and speaks to those working in business, rather than those in parliament, it is clear that they are very aware of the issue, and their solidarity with Ireland has not failed since the beginning of the process. Irish and Portuguese people share similarities and are close, even if the Irish are more fair in their colouring. The Irish and Portuguese are also similar in how they react to things, which some may find surprising. There is also a European and Atlantic solidarity. Brexit is, therefore, current in Portugal. As H.E. Ms Potzel stated, we want to maintain a close relationship with the UK because it will solve many problems, but we also want a balanced one which will preserve the integrity of the Internal Market, which Ireland and the whole of Europe needs. We are prepared to come to a solution, and a solution will be reached, but it is too early to say what form that solution will take, because what happens from week to week in London varies. We hope the situation stabilises. Following that, we must find concrete solutions to ensure the provisions and objectives of the protocol are applied and remain intact. These are concerns that Ireland and the other EU member states share.

I reassure the Senator that Portugal has not forgotten about Brexit, and it remains a major topic. I am always reporting on the issue. Even when Michel Barnier sneezes, I have to report on it.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I hope Mr. Barnier sneezes into his elbow. I express gratitude for the strong expression of solidarity with Ireland in relation to the unique difficulties that Brexit poses for us. We recognise that there are still pressure points to come, so that solidarity is not a past issue. We all hope that an agreement will be reached, but in the event that there is no agreement, the protocol is a settled matter and not one to be undermined. If we repeat that message, it increases the prospect of a deal being reached.

I have read the Presidency programmes. Presidency programmes are quite like programmes for Government in that they are extraordinarily ambitious for being programmes of just a six-month duration, but I suppose one needs a continuum. I will ask three questions, even though, like Deputy Richmond, I could ask 1,000 questions on what H.E. Ms Potzel has said and on the programme itself.

Everything in the German Presidency programme has been overshadowed by the Covid pandemic. I will not say it has been undermined because that is not the case, but it has been impacted by the pandemic.

The pandemic itself has impacted on European citizens' view of Europe. I believe it is fair comment to say there was a certain lack of solidarity at the beginning of the pandemic. All the cohesion of Europe seemed to be undermined in a rush to nationalism and protectionism in respect of our borders, medicine supply and acute hospital systems. That needs to be repaired. I am keen to hear from the ambassadors whether they believe the multi-annual financial framework of funding, the expression of solidarity and the future sharing of vaccines and medicines will rebuild that eroded sense of solidarity from the beginning of the pandemic.

My second question is a Brexit-related topic. It relates to the ambition within the German Presidency for a strengthening and integration of capital markets in Europe. Obviously, the removal of the City of London from the EU sphere will have an impact on financial services generally. I am interested in hearing the thoughts of the witnesses on the developed model of how the integrated and strengthened capital markets within a European Union without the City of London is envisaged.

My third question relates to growing nationalism in the European Union. It is an issue we discussed briefly in the preparation of our work programme. The German and Portuguese commentaries both underscored the importance of strengthening fundamental European social values. These are clearly being undermined in several European countries where the rule of law, having an independent judiciary, freedom of the press and individual human rights, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, LGBT, rights, have been significantly assaulted. I am keen to hear the uptake of the ambassadors and, rather than simply the rhetoric of saying this is a bad thing, how it will be fundamentally addressed. If the values of Europe are fundamentally undermined, then the European project itself is fundamentally undermined. Is there a place in the next phase of European Union development for countries that do not subscribe to those fundamental values?

Deputy John Brady: I welcome the ambassadors. I will not repeat some of the comments that have been made but I echo most of them, especially the comments around Brexit. The position that has been adopted in terms of support for the Irish protocol is much appreciated. I know we are facing a highly challenging period now. I believe Boris Johnson has set tomorrow as the deadline. While I do not believe that is realistic, certainly time is of the essence at this point. The support is noted and welcome.

I want to home in on some areas around the humanitarian crisis and the migration issue. The fire in Lesbos at Moria probably catapulted the issue to centre stage again. There are concerns that this ultimately exposed the complete failure of Europe to address one of the major humanitarian duties facing us, as it has been described, by allowing the situation to get to that point. I believe there has been failure by many countries. I am keen to get a viewpoint on the responses of different countries to living up to obligations and commitments made in previous agreements, like the agreement in 2015, for example. Only last week I cited our response in this State, especially in dealing with unaccompanied minors. There was an agreement here to accept 35 unaccompanied minors in 2015. To date, I understand we have only taken in nine. I am keen to get a viewpoint on that. Are countries living up to their commitments and obligations? What hopes are there for a new migration agreement if previous ones have not been adhered to and if previous obligations have not been lived up to?

On the issue of Palestine, over the summer there was a lot of concern around the threats and moves to annex large parts of the West Bank. Eleven EU foreign affairs ministers wrote to Europe to ask for guidance as to what measures could be taken if Israel annexed large sections of the area. I understood they considered different measures, such as potential embargoes, trade etc. I acknowledge that annexation *per se* has fallen off the agenda. It is not receiving the same media spotlight as was the case during the summer. That is not to say that annexation is not happening on a daily basis. The two-state solution and a viable Palestinian state are being dismantled on a daily basis. It is simply not being spoken about. The Dáil voted overwhelmingly a number of years ago to officially recognise the state of Palestine. It is an issue that has been debated at European level over a number of years. Is it now time, at European level, to recognise the state of Palestine officially? What measures are being or will be looked at if the hopes, dreams and aspirations of people living in the state are ultimately destroyed with the annexation of up to 30% of the West Bank? I wish to touch on the right to determination. In October 2017, the Catalan people voted overwhelmingly to express their right to self-determination and to live in an independent Catalan state. Since that time, parliamentarians have been imprisoned. Recently, the Catalan President was banned from public office. As was said, it is ultimately an attempt to destroy the Government of Catalonia. Very little has been said about it at a European level. The silence of the Government regarding this attack on the democratic process has been deafening. What approach will be taken to the continued blatant disregard for the express views of the majority of the Catalan people in terms of self-determination? What measures will be taken by the outgoing German Presidency and incoming Portuguese Presidency?

It was stated that the escalating situation in the eastern Mediterranean is deeply concerning. Some measures have been taken to bring all parties around the table. I note that Turkey has sent a research ship back into the waters that are of grave concern. That may show that that side is not being serious about negotiations and coming to some sort of solution. Greece has expressed particular concerns and vetoed a position on Belarus. That was quite concerning. I welcome the measures that have been adopted by Europe in terms of Belarus but similar actions and measures are not being taken in respect of other countries. Over many years Turkey has been involved in the unlawful occupation of northern Cyprus. This issue has not been dealt with by Europe. Now we see a concerning situation in the eastern Mediterranean that has massive implications for Europe, not only in terms of destabilisation but the risk of potential conflict. What measures are being looked at? I know the primary objective is to get everyone around the table but that is difficult when some of the people who should be around the table are ratcheting up tensions by sending out ships. Will the ambassador give a viewpoint on the eastern Mediterranean because it is an issue, unfortunately, that will continue to escalate until all partners get around the table?

H.E. Mr. Miguel de Almeida e Sousa: I am happy to see Deputy Howlin in good health. Regarding his questions, it is true that in the beginning the response given to the pandemic was very national in the sense that governments had to show their citizens that they were acting. However, President von der Leyen has said from the very beginning the EU was working on it without visibility. On many issues, one of the problems for the EU is that its work is not acknowledged or known but it is done. That is one of the European problems and it is a problem of perception. The EU has worked like a hut or covering and it has been very important on co-ordination as a result. It has created the forum where we can exchange information. It provided some alternatives and solutions for dealing with different aspects of the pandemic. Now people acknowledge there is a role for the European Commission but it started before it was known. I sat in Brussels for many years and I knew that sometimes outside the Council, we are keen to show there is a victory and we are successful when, in fact, often there is compromise so it is

success for everyone and not only one member state. Sometimes it is a problem of presentation.

Regarding future treatments and vaccines, this is a global pandemic which will have a global solution. This will not be only inside the EU or the US. Today we heard from several laboratories that are exploring. They say it will be for the benefit of all humanity. The treatment will be worldwide. It is global because if we solve a problem on one side but not the other, it will come back. We need a global approach and it will come.

On nationalism in the EU, it is true that we have it in several countries. In Portugal, for example, we do not have it. It is not known but we have an unsolved problem with Spain regarding a small corner. The problem is still open but we do not discuss it. We have a very pragmatic view that we will solve it. This dates from the 18th century so it is has been a long time.

We do not have nationalism but there is an increase. We were saying earlier that if people have a perception of the benefits of the European Union, Europe will answer to them. That will be the best solution to fighting nationalism. Every member state must apply the rule of law and the rules of democracy. We have to find balanced solutions to ensure that it will do so. I agree it is a big problem but the more successfully the European Union works, the less probability of this surge of nationalism being successful and it will diminish.

Regarding the protocol, it was signed by all member states so it is international law. It was ratified so it is untouchable. If there is no Brexit deal, we have to find solutions to ensure that what we intend to protect with the protocol will work. In terms of how we will do that, let us take one worry at a time.

Regarding Israel, I served as ambassador to Israel before coming to Ireland. One of the lessons I learned is that it is a country where nothing is obvious. I was still in Israel when the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, came to visit. He had a very good approach regarding Israel. Ireland, with the positions it has taken, is listened to carefully now. The problem with the Middle East is that there are different narratives. They fight for the same land, which is not very large. Some kind of solution will come. When one travels around Israel, and the officials with me may not see it, one will see that there is a consciousness that a two-state solution will come about. It will be needed. It is not forgotten. I know that the values and principles of the EU are presented every day. We have taken several measures and they made the Israeli Government reconsider some of its decisions and the statements. It is a region where, in the end, the victory comes from the one who speaks louder but what is behind it can sometimes be completely different. I can share with the members my experience in Israel. The position of the EU has not changed. It is two states for two peoples living in peace and security. That is the position also of several countries around it. I know it is difficult but as was said, it is full of ups and downs.

Regarding Catalonia, it is a Spanish internal problem. There are constitutional mechanisms to solve it. We hope they will be acting on those and the European Union can follow on that point. However, it is up to the Spanish regions to resolve the issue of how they can be together. If they decided to split, which I hope will never be the case, that will be a decision made by all of them. The problem must be treated within the constitutional framework of Spain. The problem regarding the eastern Mediterranean is serious. Germany has an important role as mediator and the mediation is more or less working. It is an unsolved problem, of course, that the European Union is in solidarity with the member states involved but also has a responsibility to help in some way to find a solution which cannot be imposed; it must be decided by all of them.

These are problematic areas where one cannot impose a solution from the outside. It does not work like that. Where needed, one's role will be more efficient if one intervenes as mediator, adviser and encourager. However, if one tries to impose on some of the Catalan cases, I know it will be counterproductive.

H.E. Ms Deike Potzel: That was so comprehensive that I will pick up on, perhaps, one or two things and keep it short. Mr. de Almeida e Sousa described the impact and lack of solidarity, as the Deputy described it, within the EU regarding the pandemic. It would be wonderful if we could change that narrative a little bit in the sense that we might be able to look at what has been achieved since. There is no doubt mistakes were made at the beginning and that we could have done better. On the other hand, this thing came of the blue and we did not have a blueprint in the drawers of how to go about it. Since health policy is still a national competency, everybody was focusing on an immediate response. As Mr. de Almeida e Sousa said and as everybody agrees, mistakes were made in that process.

We can, however, be proud of the solidarity that has been shown within the EU. I think of the hundreds of thousands of stranded tourists we brought back together. Everybody helped one another. German and Portuguese tourists were on Irish planes and *vice versa*. We brought back Irish and Portuguese people as well. That was helpful. I do not want to brag about what we did but I know what Germany did. It was appreciated that we took in patients from Italy and France when their ICUs were overloaded. We will now hopefully get the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, and recovery fund going. We are taking that much money into our hands to help and deviate from or overcome the economic and social impacts of the pandemic. It is also worthwhile looking at the positives achieved in that process.

I wish also to say a few words on the concern about growing nationalism in the EU, which we all agree we need to look into. We are doing so and, as Mr. de Almeida e Sousa said, we need to talk with citizens in our societies about the importance of the values of the European Union which we all agree upon. We need to do that. I will allude to the fact we celebrated 30 years of German reunification on 3 October. I was born in East Germany and I know what it feels like not to have the freedoms we all enjoy in Europe, that is, the freedoms of expression, movement and assembly and the freedom to design and pursue one's life in a space of freedom and liberty. We need to talk about this more in our societies. We must also keep reaching out to what are known as the "bubbles" on social media to try to break those bubbles and reach out to people who are not of the same view. We need to keep that dialogue going to make people aware of the wonderful treasure that we have in our open, liberal and democratic societies. That is extremely important. There are reasons or roots for nationalism which are very different in every country and it is important for countries to look at that themselves, I suppose. We do have ways and means, such as the Article 7 procedures against Hungary and Poland that are going on and will go on and, also, in the European context, to deal with certain aspects of the rule of law and to defend the rule of law in our member states.

On Palestine, we have and will continue to strongly advocate a two-state solution for Palestine and Israel. We are in very close contact with our Israeli friends, but also with our Palestinian friends. There is a huge amount of economic support for Palestine. We have a close relationship to both Israeli and Palestine and with reference to the annexation plans, we have been very clear and very outspoken to our Israeli friends that we feel that that is a step in the wrong direction and that we still advocate a two-state solution. We are very clear on that, including as a member of the EU. Our foreign minister had a very good exchange with the Israeli foreign minister at one of the last meetings of the Council. I cannot recall at which council but

the latter attended for a lunch and the ministers had a very good exchange on all these matters.

On the eastern Mediterranean, we are very much in solidarity with our Cypriot friends and our Greek friends. We tried to reach out to Turkey and we will keep trying. We have said that back and forth from the Turkish side in terms of agreeing to talk and then sending in another ship is not helpful. We have said that is definitely not helping the dialogue. We will sit together in the EU. We have told our friends from Cyprus that we will sit together and figure out what other signals we can send to the Turkish Government to make it even more aware of where we stand on this. We will not give up on that - definitely not.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I welcome the ambassadors and I thank them for the solidarity they have shown the people of Ireland on the ongoing Brexit negotiations. I will make two points. The first is related to the agreement yesterday by the Council to a traffic light system to co-ordinate travel restrictions across Europe, putting in place a common mapping system to define areas at different levels of risk. Is there broad support for this in Portugal and Germany? Do the ambassadors think we are a little behind when it comes to Covid-19 pre-flight testing? Is it something the Presidency may be thinking of rolling out? We need to get our countries up and running again economically and we are going to be living with Covid for some time. Should pre-flight testing be part of our agenda in Europe going forward?

My next point is in regard to the future of Europe, putting the citizen at the centre of that and building alliances. Our guest witnesses' countries have very ambitious Presidency programmes. How ambitious are their countries in respect of putting their citizens first? At present, in Ireland we offer free travel to our citizens over the age of 65. I note that this is also done in Belgium and Hungary. Would it not be wonderful if we could build alliances to offer free travel or discounted travel to all of our elderly citizens within our European states? Many people today when going abroad when over the age of 70 cannot even hire a car in some of these European countries because of their age. Perhaps that might be an ambitious programme for our guests to take back as part of their Presidency of the European Council in the future. That would be one way to put the citizens first. Those are the two points I wished to make to our guest and I thank them for coming in.

Deputy Seán Haughey: We have had a wide-ranging discussion here this morning and have covered all of the major topics.

I refer to an editorial in *The Irish Times* dated 2 June 2020 relating to Chancellor Merkel, which stated, "Europe's longest-serving leader faces an Olympian test of her eye for detail, her nose for negotiation and her ear for compromise." The article refers to Chancellor Merkel as "Europe's safest pair of hands". We are fortunate to have Chancellor Merkel in the Presidency at this particularly challenging time for Europe and I refer especially to the Covid-19 problem. Our witnesses have outlined the major concerns and issues in respect of the current Presidency and the incoming Presidency.

We had an unprecedented budget for unprecedented times yesterday here. The multi-annual financial framework, MFF, and the associated recovery fund are also unprecedented. It should not be lost on anybody that Europe will borrow money to get us out of this serious economic situation. I am hoping that by the time Portugal takes over, some of these issues will be off the agenda, that the recovery fund will be up and running and we will have an agreement or no agreement with the United Kingdom. One way or another, Brexit is coming to a conclusion and like the other speakers, I thank both of our guests' countries for the solidarity they have shown to the Irish situation arising from Brexit.

On migration and refugee policy generally and the Commission proposal, migration is a big issue in several European states and we have referred to the rise of nationalism and of populism. I hope the ambassador from Portugal does not mind if I ask the German ambassador a specific question. On the domestic opinion on migration in Germany, the ambassador spoke of the need for solidarity on a European level and the need to share the burden. Would that be a widely held view among the citizens of Germany? Is it a general humanitarian concern or an economic concern? We all remember the pictures on our television screens of Germany opening up its borders and the queues of refugees arriving in. That really made an impression and brought home the whole migration situation to all of us. I am interested to know what the domestic opinion is on this issue and why that decision was taken? Is there a strong humanitarian concern in Germany among its citizens?

Otherwise, I wish both of our guests well in their endeavours. We had a long discussion on the rule of law and on the conference on the future of Europe. The Irish model in the first phases of that went very well and the Irish citizens were significantly engaged with that process. I recall that the then Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, spearheaded that process.

I ask that my one specific question be addressed.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank both Ambassador Potzel and Ambassador de Almeida e Sousa and I also apologise now for my pronunciations. An awful lot has been dealt with. I also thank our guests for their solidarity on Brexit. They may not feel inclined to answer the following question but I am going to ask it anyway. The Minister for Foreign Affairs spoke to the committee last week and expressed his view that Britain needs a deal as badly as anyone else and, to a degree, we need to concentrate on ensuring a deal that will protect Europe and Ireland, and gives Britain what it needs. That said, we must allow for a worst-case scenario. The Internal Market Bill is now in place and we must consider the possibility of other legislation and the circumventing of the Ireland and Northern Ireland protocol. I welcome the fact that our guests have said that they will stand with Ireland. Could I ask for some detail on that, as far as our guests can go? There is a need for an almost hermetical seal around the Single Market and customs union. What happens in a doomsday Brexit situation?

I welcome what has been said about the improving pandemic response. There has been mention of the traffic light system and I would also throw the testing scenario into that. Our considerations are the future as regards the health response, which is changing all the time, and the recovery fund and what we do about that. There has perhaps been too much of an emphasis on loans versus grants. Down the line, we must look at something that will be more of a Marshall Plan-type scenario. How would our guests foresee that happening?

Mention was made earlier about the future of Europe. There are difficulties surrounding the multi-annual financial framework. Our guests have spoken about moving in the direction of a social Europe. The pandemic has taught us of the necessity of public service and governmental intervention. Europe has been very good but, to a degree, there has been an overemphasis in latter years on private enterprise and the free flow of capital, although I do not wish to take away from those things. We need protection for people and some of that is about the ability at European or governmental level to bring in necessary protections. We have had to ride roughshod over certain rules at domestic and European levels to do what was necessary to respond to the pandemic.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. We are a wee bit tight for time because we have to finish within two hours.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Our guests could just answer my questions, in that case.

Chairman: I would ask our guests to answer all the questions but I call for brevity. I have noted the leadership of H.E. Potzel in this department but that is no criticism whatsoever of H.E. Almeida e Sousa.

H.E. Ms Deike Potzel: I will try to be quick. I thank the committee members for their questions. I was asked about the broad support for the traffic light system. It is very much in the interests of our citizens that they have clarity on how, where and when they can travel. Much of the insecurity that we observe arises from changing targets and it is important that we have an agreement. There is broad support within the population in Germany. I do not have poll numbers to reflect that but I think there is broad support for this clarity that gives people something to work with. We get asked what is going on every day at the embassy. That is important.

I will send back the recommendation on free travel for senior citizens. There are obviously discount measures in all countries but I will definitely send back the Senator's suggestion.

I thank Deputy Haughey for his warm words about Chancellor Merkel. He asked about migration and the domestic opinion in Germany. One has to say that it is a mixed picture. At the beginning, the Chancellor decided to keep the borders open and it is important to stress that. A lot of people say the Chancellor opened the borders but she really kept them open. She would have had to make a decision to close them but she left them open and that was definitely a humanitarian decision. People on many points of the political spectrum supported that decision but in the aftermath we have seen that the influx of almost 1 million refugees also led to a strengthening of right-leaning parties in Germany too. Overall however, five years on from the decision and the 2015 refugee crisis, the feeling in Germany is that it worked out well and that integration of foreigners and refugees - which we still have to improve - worked well. I think it is reported in today's edition of *The Irish Times* that for the first time ever, the population of Germany is shrinking and we realise we do actually need immigration as a country.

As such, it is a mixed picture. Some people would not be very much in agreement with the way the German Government handled it and they are worried about certain aspects of it but if one looks at opinion polls, the majority of people would say we did well and that we also profit from immigration. Obviously, however, in view of the migration policy and asylum policy we are trying to put in place in European countries, we have to make efforts to deal with illegal immigration and to look into how to react to people who do not have a reason for getting asylum, for instance. We definitely need to look at these issues. All in all, however, I think the opinion is, as I said, pretty positive on that back home.

In a quick word on Brexit, we keep saying we expect the British Government to fully respect the obligations in the withdrawal agreement and we will keep saying that. Obviously the protection of the Single Market is paramount and Ireland has said that time and again as well. I think we are all in the same boat on this. The Chancellor has also said more than once that it is not an Irish problem but a European one. As such we will keep telling the Brits to stick to the withdrawal agreement and of course the Northern Ireland protocol. If we do not succeed in getting a deal and it ends up in a no-deal scenario, we will still keep pushing them to implement what they have signed up for. That is as much as I can say on that at the moment.

On protection of citizens, if I got that question correctly, looking at the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, and especially the recovery fund, I think most of the targets there are aimed at helping our citizens to get through this pandemic and to overcome the repercussions

due to the pandemic. While it might not always be spelled out, it is definitely there. In addition, one of our priorities that I have not mentioned yet was a social Europe and the protection of our citizens, our youngsters and youth, which is very important. We feel that also requires a strong, co-ordinated European response but that is definitely also something we want. We want to strengthen the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, for instance, within the EU framework for national minimum wages or minimum security schemes. We intend to evaluate the proposal for a European unemployment reinsurance scheme. It was announced by the European Commission and is very important to us. We are also committed to strengthening the Youth Guarantee and tackling youth unemployment. Perhaps these are not among the headlines, given what is going on at present, but they are important parts of our work.

H.E. Mr. Miguel de Almeida e Sousa: I do not really have anything to add to what Ms Potzel has said. Migration and nationalism are not a problem in Portugal because our history means we are used to having migrants. Like Ireland, we are taking many migrants from the camps and boats. The numbers are increasing so we need a common response. It would be easier for countries such as ours, which are used to migrants. Germany is also used to migrants. It has a huge Portuguese community and both nationalities are very happy. We must help to form perceptions but we cannot impose solutions. By their example, Ireland, Portugal and Germany are making a positive contribution.

H.E. Ms Deike Potzel: A question was asked about burden sharing and whether that is something the German population would rally behind as an idea. In a single word, the answer is “Yes”. There is definitely a sentiment in Germany that we need a European answer and that sharing and support for the front-line states are very important. Everybody needs to be on board and every European Union member state has an obligation to help and support in this.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses for their attendance and participation today. Ms Potzel spoke about solidarity and co-operation. She also spoke about freedom, and we cannot speak enough about the freedoms we enjoy as members of the European Union. Mr. de Almeida e Sousa spoke about resilience, which is something we can identify with on the west coast of this wee island with regard to looking out at the wild Atlantic Ocean. There is no direct equivalent word in the Irish language for resilience but there is an expression for resilience, which is *teacht aniar*. I do not know whether it came from west Kerry, Connemara or Donegal but when people woke up on Monday morning, looked out at the sea and tried to figure out where they would go from there during tough times, certainly resilience came to mind.

Digitisation is the theme of the German Presidency and it is very interesting to hear the continuity on this. The whole idea of having both witnesses today was continuity, and they also work closely with their Slovakian colleagues. Mr. de Almeida e Sousa said Portugal will work with the instruments developed by the German Presidency to continue that work. This is very important as we try to pave a way forward.

We are also conscious of the multi-annual financial framework and the funding for it from 2021 to 2027. Whatever work comes out of digitisation there are also questions within it on how we engage with citizens. Physical interaction varies between limited and non-existent. How do we put the European citizen at the centre of these deliberations and conversations? Senator Keogan used a practical example. We still have opportunities to do this. While people cannot meet and limited interaction is the conversation of the day, with digitisation people can still communicate. The witnesses have emphasised a stronger and more innovative Europe.

With regard to the principle of subsidiarity, which has been flying around Europe for a

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number of decades, we are in that space now. We can work according to the principle of subsidiarity in that we can hear the voices of people in very rural and marginalised, peripheral areas because of digital opportunities but we need to back up our capacity and build resilience. All of us in this room have examples from our constituencies and countries of communities that are considering more innovative approaches. In my parish, Carrigart, we are building a digital hub. Towns such as Rathmullan in my county are looking at smart villages. There is an example of funding for smart villages throughout Europe but I believe we can build on the capacity a little more. I will have information on that. I do not require a response today but I can forward the information.

An old Irish saying I came across in Connemara a couple of years ago is, “Castar na daoine ar a chéile ach ní chastar na cnoic ná na sléibhte.” “The people meet but the hills and the mountains do not.” At present, we face an unbelievable dilemma: not alone do the hills and mountains not meet but the people do not meet either. Therefore, we have to work so much harder at connecting people. It is a matter of building resilience and connections. Ambassador Potzel, *danke*. Ambassador de Almeida e Sousa, *obrigado*. Go raibh maith agaibh. Thank you very much.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.02 a.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 21 October 2020.