

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ AN AONTAIS EORPAIGH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN UNION AFFAIRS

Dé Céadaoin, 25 Samhain 2020

Wednesday, 25 November 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,	Regina Doherty,
Dara Calleary,	Sharon Keogan.
Seán Haughey,	
Brendan Howlin,	
Ruairí Ó Murchú,	
Neale Richmond.	

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

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Harkin and Senator Chambers. I propose that we go into private session to deal with some housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 9.02 a.m. and resumed in public session at 9.31 a.m.

Conference on Future of Europe and Related Matters: Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs

Chairman: Ar son an choiste, cuirim fáilte ollmhór roimh an Aire Stáit, Teachta Byrne. Is é seo an chéad uair a bheidh teagmháil fhoirmiúil aige leis an gcoiste. Ar son an choiste, guím gach rath air lena obair thábhachtach agus shuntasach, leis na rudaí atá ag teacht ó thaobh an Bhreitheachta de agus leis na rudaí atá ag teacht ón Eoraip.

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

I call on the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, to make his opening statement.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Senator Thomas Byrne): Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach, na Teachtaí agus na Seanadóirí as an bhfáilte agus as an gcuireadh teacht anseo ar maidin. Táim an-sásta teacht os comhair an choiste ar maidin agus an chomhdháil ar thodhchaí na hEorpa atá molta a phlé leis. Cuirim fáilte roimh shuim an choiste san ábhar seo agus roimh na seisiúin fhaisnéiseacha a bhí aige níos luaithe an mhí seo. Creidim go mbeadh agus go mbeidh ionchur tábhachtach ag parlaimintí náisiúnta ar fud an Aontais Eorpaigh leis an bpróiseas nuair a sheolfar é.

Táim cinnte go bhfuil a fhios ag an gcuid is mó den choiste gur tháinig an togra don chomhdháil ar dtús ó Uachtarán na Fraince, Emmanuel Macron, in alt nuachtáin a scríobh sé in earrach na bliana seo caite. Ghlac an Coimisiún Eorpach leis ina dhiaidh sin mar thionscnamh chun na páirtithe leasmhara, agus gnáthshaoránaigh ach go háirithe, a thabhairt isteach. Go deimhin, bhí sé mar cheann de na gnéithe lárnacha i gclár oibre choimisiún an Uachtaráin, Ursula von der Leyen, nuair a chuaigh an coimisiún sin i mbun oifige ag deireadh na bliana seo caite. Tacaíonn Éire leis an togra, ach bhíomar comhsheasmhach freisin ag éileamh go gcaithfidh sé a bheith ábhartha ionas go mbeadh brí ag baint leis. Ní féidir leis an gcomhdháil a bheith ina comhrá i measc na mionlach polaitiúil..

Ní hé seo an áit le machnamh a dhéanamh ar an bpaindéim Covid-19 agus ar na torthaí tubaisteacha a bhí aici ar an oiread sin gnáthdhaoine agus ar a slite beatha, ní hamháin san Eoraip ach ar fud an domhain. Is léir, áfach, agus muid ag súil go dtosóimid ag bogadh i dtreo téarnaimh gheilleagraigh láidir a chruthú, go mbeidh ról an Aontais Eorpaigh chun tosaigh agus lárnach. Tá cás láidir le déanamh don chomhdháil a bheith mar bhealach chun gnáthshaoránaigh a mhealladh maidir leis an gcineál Eorpa a theastaíonn uainn a fheiceáil ag teacht slán as an ngéarchéim seo.

Mar sin, ní mór don chomhdháil díriú ar na rudaí is tábhachtaí do ghnáthshaoránaigh. Conas téarnamh geilleagrach a chinntiú agus rathúnas níos cothroime a chur chun cinn? Conas is féidir linn cinntiú go bhfuil an tAontas Eorpach in ann aghaidh a thabhairt ar dhúshláin an athraithe aeráide agus an digitithe? Conas is féidir leis an Aontas Eorpach na luachanna sin atá bunúsach dúinn uilig a chur chun cinn i mbealach níos fearr, ar nós an smachta reachta agus cearta daonna a chosaint? Conas is féidir linn mórtionchar domhanda an Aontais Eorpaigh a chur chun cinn? Ní hacmhainn don Aontas Eorpach a bheith gafa le saincheisteanna nach bhfuil chomh práinneach dár saoránaigh, ar nós ceisteanna institiúideacha agus ceisteanna maidir leis an gcothromaíocht laistigh de struchtúir an Aontais. Tá áthas orm a thuairisciú go bhfuil an dearcadh seo roinnte go forleathan i measc na mballstát.

Creideann cuid a thacaíonn leis an gComhdháil go gcaithfidh gach saincheist, lena n-áirítear athrú féideartha ar na conarthaí, a bheith ar an mbord.

The Government does not favour treaty change as an objective of the conference. We believe there is already sufficient scope for strengthening the Union within the existing treaties, not least the Lisbon treaty, which remains to be fully exploited. Our clear preference at this stage, therefore, is for a policy-led approach to the future work of the conference. Again, it is encouraging that this approach is the dominant one among our partners.

The original intention on the part of the Commission and President von der Leyen had been to launch the conference on Europe day this year, 9 May. Obviously, the pandemic has led to delay. Six months on, deliberations are still continuing between the Council and Parliament to finalise arrangements and a work plan for the conference.

The Council, which agreed a common position on the conference last June, has advocated a policy first approach, which prioritises implementation of the EU strategic agenda. The Council has also been clear that the role and prerogatives of each of the institutions must be respected, with full equality between them in how the conference is organised. The Council is also keen that the ultimate outcome of the conference should be a report to the European Council at some time during 2022. It has also been clear that the conference does not fall within the scope of Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union concerning the amendment of the EU treaties.

The Parliament, for its part, has stated that, in addition to consideration of the policy priorities set out in the strategic agenda, democratic and institutional aspects of the EU must also be addressed by the conference. This is likely to cover such issues as the Spitzenkandidat process and the question of transnational lists for European Parliament elections. The Parliament also wants an early cross-institutional commitment to implement the conference's recommendations, including through treaty change if necessary.

Notwithstanding these differing perspectives, the German Presidency has made good progress in securing broad agreement on a mandate and programme for the conference. The main outstanding issue relates to who should chair the conference. On this issue, we have made clear we support the German Presidency and the Council in favouring an experienced, independent individual to take on this important role. Opinions are sharply divided between the Council and the Parliament on this issue and it may require reference to the European Council to secure final agreement.

Realistically, therefore, it is now likely to be early next year at the earliest before the initiative is formally launched. Once the programme and scope have been agreed between the Council and Parliament, member states will be encouraged to start preparing individual na-

tional plans for engaging ordinary citizens and relevant stakeholders including, in our case, this committee and the Oireachtas, within the framework of the conference.

In this regard, Ireland has an excellent track record of active engagement with citizens on the issue of Europe on which we can build. We know from discussions with EU partners that many have been impressed with the work of our citizens' assemblies, and I have discussed them with my counterparts, and with the series of citizens' dialogues held during 2018 and 2019 to input into the national statement on Europe issued by the previous Government in April of last year. We also have some excellent partner institutes here in Ireland with whom we have successfully collaborated in this area.

The difficulties presented by the pandemic undoubtedly present challenges in organising the type of public consultations and town hall meetings which were so well supported in the past. However, as recent months have shown, there are plenty of alternative means, through virtual platforms, to interact with each other. Indeed, online consultations may allow us to reach important target groups, particularly among the younger population who arguably should be most engaged about the future of Europe, in a manner which might be more effective than through traditional methods. The structure of the engagement within each member state cannot be finalised until final agreement is reached between the EU institutions and the vision of the chair is outlined.

The Government is also determined that the Oireachtas must be fully engaged in the work of the conference since it is recognised across Europe that national parliaments have a key role to play as the democratically-elected representatives of Europe's citizens. As Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, I am very keen to hear the thoughts and views of the committee on how the conference should operate and how the committee and Oireachtas Members generally can most usefully input into its deliberations.

I would like to see today as the start of a dialogue which will continue in the coming weeks and months, as we prepare to launch the conference, we hope early next year, and plan for its conduct here in Ireland.

This is an important issue. The last months have, I hope, only reinforced how central a role Europe plays in all our lives, as we work together to overcome the virus and lay the groundwork for a strong economic recovery. I am sure that the Europe which will emerge from this crisis will be an even better and stronger Union, firmly based on the solidarity we all have all seen at the Brexit process but that now applies, and always applied, to other issues, partnership, and common values. It will be crucial in 2021 and the coming years to engage actively with our citizens, act on that engagement and hear how exactly we can ensure that is the case. Táim sásta ceisteanna a thógáil anois. I am happy to take any questions now.

Chairman: The first person indicating is Deputy Brendan Howlin who will be followed by Deputy Dara Calleary. I will take two at a time, if that is agreeable.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit agus gabhaim míle buíochas leis as ucht an mhéid atá ráite aige. I will divert slightly and say that much of the work of this committee has been focused on Brexit and the impact of Brexit in recent times. One of the areas I have been banging a drum about for two years is connectivity. As an aside, I welcomed the Minister of State's visit to Rosslare Europort last week but we have been working in consort on this, which was remarked upon by the Tánaiste, and therefore it was jarring that he was accompanied only by Government Deputies. The rest of us were not informed of his visit to Rosslare

Europort. It is an issue on which we have been acting in a collective manner.

I am interested in putting a couple of questions to the Minister of State in terms of the future of Europe debate. First, I do not know whether he had a chance to read the speech made by the Portuguese Prime Minister, António Costa, on Monday to the Catholic University of Portugal where he set out his view on what he classified as a smaller European Union of values post Brexit. He talked about a two-speed Europe being required now with an inner core of Europe accepting debt transfers, migrant quotas and the rule of law and those who were not willing to subscribe to those being in a second tier, so to speak. He described it as variable geometries because of the real dichotomy that exists in Europe that has to be recognised and addressed if we are to make progress. I do not know whether the Minister of State has had a chance to reflect on that but it is a view he will have heard in any event and I would be interested to hear his perspective on it. If, as I suspect, he is not in favour of a two-speed Europe, how do we address that real dichotomy Prime Minister Acosta has mentioned?

Second, I take it from what the Minister of State said that treaty change is not ruled out but not favoured by the Irish Government. He talked about the unutilised aspects of existing treaties, which is an issue we have discussed previously, particularly the Treaty of Lisbon. He might set out for us what specifically in the Lisbon treaty he regards as unutilised that could and should now be utilised.

Third, regarding the new election processes, particularly the Spitzenkandidat process, which I would suspect outside this House and a small coterie of people would be regarded as a complete unknown entity, I know that the internal dialogue within the Socialists & Democrats, S & D, Group between Frans Timmermans and Maroš Šefčovič did not ignite the population of my constituents or anybody else and I do not see how they could in the future. What is the Minister of State's view on that because if we are to have real involvement in elections we have to make them relevant and I am not sure that saying we are putting forward a candidate, from our perspective or that of the Socialists & Democrats Group, Maroš Šefčovič or Frans Timmermans is the way to do that?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit agus roimh a úsáid den Ghaeilge. I have a couple of questions which are similar to those of Deputy Howlin. First, by indicating that we do not want to go to treaty change are we not limiting the ambition of the convention and what we may be able to contribute to that? Similar to the question Deputy Howlin asked, what are the existing provisions the Minister of State sees being used? We had a good discussion on that last week with people like Brigid Laffan but in terms of the Government, what are the existing provisions that are unused that the Minister of State sees being used? Why have they not been used to date and will suddenly now come into vogue, as it were?

Second, regarding Covid-19, we have seen the strengths of Europe but we will particularly see the strengths of the Union in the first quarter of next year. The Union's approach to vaccine purchase, in particular, and research makes sure that a small country like Ireland will be at the vanguard of the vaccine. However, we have also seen the weaknesses in the past few weeks in respect of the recovery fund being objected to as a consequence of the rule of law issue. As we prepared to discuss the future of Europe, one that is based on values that are being challenged now by using the way that Europe operates, what is the Minister of State's position on that? Have we been too quiet as a Government about the events of the past number of weeks that a recovery fund, which is vital for healthcare and for the citizens, could be objected to on the basis of two countries in particular having different views of values?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I acknowledge the first point Deputy Howlin made. The visit was organised at the last minute. In future, I will make sure everyone is invited. On that note, the French Minister, Clément Beaune, is coming to the country on Monday week, I understand. It is planned to have a visit to the Border. With Covid-19 restrictions, we will make sure that every party is represented from the areas affected. I am sure Deputy Ó Murchú will be on the invite list when the French Minister comes to the Border. We have not finalised the arrangements yet but I assume it will be in Louth. I take on board the point made by Deputy Howlin.

I have not seen the Portuguese Prime Minister's speech but it is obviously a view I have heard previously. It is not a new view to me or any of us who have been working on European affairs. I was a member of this committee 11 or 12 years ago and I heard the view that we need a two-speed Europe, and we certainly hear members saying that. It is clearly not something we would favour. In respect of Brexit, for example, all we have seen is a one-speed Europe, absolute solidarity and full backing for our position but, importantly, full backing for the negotiators also. If we had a two-speed Europe I believe it would divide Europe and make us weaker. One point I and all my colleagues would make about the Brexit process, and now to be visited in the Covid situation, is that solidarity and unity makes us very strong and gives our citizens strength also. Again, I have not seen the Portuguese Prime Minister's speech but not every member state will be on the same page on each of the issues the Deputy mentioned in terms of debt transfers, migrant quotas and rule of law. I am not sure where he gets the one-speed and the two-speed approach. A certain number of countries are on those three issues and a certain number are not.

To be clear, we have to be tougher on the rule of law. There is one speed on the rule of law and it is the treaty, which every country has signed up to, and those treaties have to be complied with by every country. There is no two-speed process. We have the Article 7 procedure and the Anglo rule of law report, which the European Commissioner, Didier Reynders, has said he is willing to go before national parliaments to talk about those issues, and the conditionality in the multiannual financial framework, MFF.

Related to that, Deputy Calleary wondered whether we have been quiet on this issue over the past number of weeks. We have been very strong on the rule of law. I have written to my Polish colleague on the issue and in any of our interactions with Ministers we have raised rule of law issues, and at my interactions at the General Affairs Council also. The Taoiseach has been very strong on that issue at the European Council, as have the vast majority of member states.

On the current events on rule of law and the MFF, the German Presidency has been taking a calm approach on that. It has not overreacted. It seems to be confident that it is working on something that will get agreement. Everyone will have a veto on this issue. It is a difficult situation for them. Two countries have made their views known. It was pleasing to hear it from Spain and I heard it directly from my Italian colleague as well. They have been saying it in the media. These countries are keen to ensure that European money is spent. They will be major beneficiaries of what is coming in this multiannual financial framework and the next generation EU. They are keen that the rule of law be complied with as well and they have been strong on that. They have not wavered in any way. Every country needs spending but they have been clear. This is encouraging on rule of law. Every member state is the same. Let us see what happens with the German Presidency in the coming days. There is no doubt this is urgent. It is one of several urgent issues on the agenda, unfortunately.

I was asked about unused provisions of the Lisbon treaty. Obviously, it will be for the conference chair to look at the treaty and see what elements could be used better. There will be

some arguing for provisions from the Lisbon treaty. I have already seen this with the MFF and commentary on enhanced co-operation. We had considerable discussion about the *passerelle* clause when the Lisbon treaty debate was going on. These issues could work effectively in some areas but they may not work in other areas. They may work to our disadvantage or to the disadvantage of other countries. We will have to wait and see.

We will see with the pandemic as well. This is a good example of why treaty changes are not the be-all and end-all. We have seen extensive work at European level on the pandemic and the vaccine in a climate in which health is not really a competence of the European Union in the same way as other matters. We believe there is major scope within the Lisbon treaty. Climate change is another example. I remember in the referendum it was mentioned as an item that could be dealt with. It is only now really coming to fruition in terms of the actions the European Union is about to take. That is one example of something that is about to take off.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I have a few questions and I want to pick up some of the points colleagues have raised. They are consistent with the discussions we have had with the academic and societal experts who have come before the committee so far.

Will the Minister of State elaborate on when we expect a conference chair to be appointed? Much seems to depend on who this person is or where the person comes from in terms of setting out the policy agenda. It is interesting to look at this in advance. I know much discussion and engagement is yet to happen. Can the Minister of State indicate at this stage what the policy priorities for the Government will be? The Minister of State has referred to the great work done at European level in responding to Covid-19. This has been especially highlighted in the past ten days in respect of vaccines and the fact that the EU has secured so many vaccines. It is stark. We must remember that Ireland outside the EU simply would not have had this access to pre-ordered vaccines. I hope they will be important in getting us back to normal sooner rather than later.

Deputy Howlin referred to some of the other areas that may be contentious, including our own resources and the future of the Union in a policy directive. Has the Government started to formulate any positions?

I wish to pick up on the point made by Deputy Calleary on treaty change. Understandably, the Minister of State gave a strong position to the effect that the Irish Government at this stage does not favour treaty change. Is that decision political or rooted in the policies or, as Deputy Howlin said, because of what is available within the Lisbon treaty?

When it comes to discussing the EU and the future of the EU we need to put aside the fear that we are one of the few member states which, if there is treaty change, has to put the matter to referendum. We need to accept that. If that happens, then so be it. However, we should not let it limit the conversation, especially if it leads to a better working European Union.

When we talk about a two-speed Europe, we need to be frank. Europe operates at multiple speeds. Some of us are members of the euro, some of us are not. Some European member states are more involved in PESCO, while others embrace it in a different way. This idea of a one-size-fits-all European Union of 27 different member states is a nonsense. We need to accept that it moves in separate ways.

It has been made clear in recent days, as Deputy Calleary has mentioned, that the issue is

really that certain people do not want to agree with the core principles of the EU. We can move in different directions. It does not matter in the wider scheme if we have the euro and Denmark does not, but it does matter if people in Poland or Hungary cannot have their rights recognised. That is at the core and we need to stress it.

An interesting issue was raised relating to the Spitzenkandidat process. I travelled to Helsinki two years ago for the European People's Party to have a big debate between whether we would run Alexander Stubb or Manfred Weber.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Household names all.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I imagine Deputy Howlin will remember when Martin Schulz came to Dublin in 2009 to campaign for the Spitzenkandidat. The whole Spitzenkandidat process is not something familiar to our electoral system. It may apply to certain continental member states but what if we had a directly elected European Commission President? I mean someone who was really directly elected rather than a Spitzenkandidat or electoral college, one in respect of whom people in Dublin, Drogheda or Gdansk could go into the ballot box and put an X beside the name. Would that really bring Europe closer to the people?

I wish to refer briefly to one final issue that is important. We are talking about the future of Europe and the potential of multispeed within member states. We have to look at the relationship with the entire neighbourhood. I am talking about accession states and countries like Serbia and North Macedonia. We had many hearings in the last Oireachtas. How do we ensure that candidate countries continue to engage with the EU, not only on an economic level but on a social level? Again, this comes back to the rule of law and rights. We are not only talking about accession but departing member states too - the UK has left. Those discussions are going on. In a line or two, what does the Minister of State hope for in the coming days for the negotiations with the United Kingdom?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Gabhaim buíochas as an chuireadh or the almost-invite. Obviously, as much as we would all love if there were no border crossings, the best ones are in County Louth.

We have had several conversations and some interaction with the Minister of State and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, as well as outside speakers and ambassadors. I do not believe anyone can deny it. No one has led me to doubt in any way that the solidarity we have around Brexit is holding. That is to be absolutely welcomed.

Obviously, people are happy with the work of the European Commission on vaccines. We can see an organised situation as regards delivery across Europe and this can bring us to a better place.

The Minister of State spoke about the possibility of the conference becoming a conversation on economic recovery. What are the views of the Minister of State on how people see this happening? We can see that there has been an element of harmonisation around some of the health aspects. There is no competence at European level in this area but we have definitely seen co-ordinated action that has been useful.

I am always somewhat apprehensive that we have varying views within Europe. Some people have a highly conservative view on the stimulus we will need when we get through this gap and beyond it. What is the view of the Minister of State on that? How will the conference be part of that?

I am not entirely sure what some of the speakers who were before the committee previously said on the idea of the conference. However, I understand reference was made to it being from the ground up in respect of where people want Europe to go or where they do not want it to go. Nothing is ruled out or in. I am always wary in respect of how much Lisbon or other frameworks can be stretched. In fairness, most speakers said that nothing has been determined on whether the outworking will lead to referendums or whatever.

There are still major issues in Europe in dealing with migration and the rule of law. We believe the rule of law is beyond the issues we have in the likes of Poland. It is also an issue with Spain and Catalonia. I am keen to hear the notions of the Minister of State on that.

The Minister of State also spoke about a plan for here whereby we would have engagement of the Houses of the Oireachtas and this committee. How does the Minister of State see that happening? A number of speakers, both internal and external, have spoken here about the fact that much of the scrutiny of European legislation was done at Westminster and that it will now not be done. Therefore, there is a need for this State to raise its game.

When discussing the concept of a two-speed Europe, or an even more tiered Europe, a number of speakers believed there was probably a change of game in Europe owing to Brexit. They expressed the view - I am not necessarily saying I agree - that there will be a main tier including all the big powers and that if a country is not part of it, it will be left behind. However, that does not necessarily mean we are going to go along with what suits Germany and France on every occasion.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Deputy Richmond asked when a conference chair will be appointed. There are two different positions. Both the Parliament and Council have published positions so it is not just a question of a chair being appointed; it is a question of reconciling the two positions. I am sure that can be done. An agreement document will have to be produced. I have not seen considerable work being done on this. I believe this is because of the pandemic and Brexit, and also because of the multiannual financial framework and the next-generation EU negotiations. The Presidency is significant. When I was first appointed as Minister of State, I expected this to be a major item on the General Affairs Council agenda. It has not really been. It is on the agenda for the informal videoconference next week. I believe it will be on the agenda of the main meeting of the General Affairs Council in December.

With regard to the conference chair, there is nonsense being circulated about Europe being for the elites but we certainly cannot have some grey-haired - I mean no disrespect in that I am going grey myself - elite person who has no relevance to every citizen. Whoever takes on the position will have to be really relevant to all citizens. We have to be very careful about who we pick. It will have to be a listener and someone who works with people, not somebody who is going to tell us what to do or what to think. It genuinely has to be from the ground up.

Most of my colleagues are aware that I have described the Citizens' Assemblies here as a genuine means not only of promoting debate among citizens but of promoting informed debate. We were sceptical of the Citizens' Assembly in opposition but one thing I liked was that its meetings were informed by experts who gave unbiased analysis of the issues. Discussions took place based on that expert input. This is something I envisage. There is obviously value in discussing and debating matters but this value is much enhanced if the process is informed by knowledge and unbiased advice given by experts. This is something I would like to see when it gets to citizens. If it does not get to citizens, it is not going to be very successful.

Policy priorities have to relate to issues of the greatest concern to our citizens. With respect, I am aware that everyone in committees such as this is sceptical of the Spitzenkandidat process. We do not believe something like that should be the focus of the conference. That would have little relevance to our citizens. The European Union necessarily has a complicated structure and I am not sure how it could be structured without an element of complication. The European Union is multilingual and, as John Hume said, it is the result of the greatest peace process in world history. The European Parliament clearly exists as an important expression of the democratic will of the citizens. At the same time, the European Council retains power as the representative of the governments elected by the citizens. Therefore, there are strong arguments to justify the complication of the European Union. It is not a federal system. Maybe direct election of a President is going too close to that. I suspect many citizens are not in favour of it. The bottom line, however, is that the system works. Generally speaking, it has produced excellent candidates. Nobody has had any difficulties with any of the individuals in position.

Issues raised at the conference should be issues of the greatest concern. People tune out when it comes to institutional issues, mechanisms and ways of dealing with procedures. At a time like this, I do not believe our citizens want to see us debating the ins and outs of processes and procedures; they want to see real action on real issues. An example of this was when there was a proposal before the Citizens' Assembly to reduce the minimum age of those entitled to vote in an Irish presidential election from 35 to 18. Most people around the table asked where it came out of and why it was relevant. It was rejected. It was not one of the recommendations made by the Citizens' Assembly at the time. It struck me as something that was just not that relevant whereas genuine societal change did occur as a result of the Citizens' Assembly dealing with many relevant issues. The assembly laid the groundwork for this change because people were interested and wanted to engage. They want real actions on sustainability and climate that will make a genuine difference. This is starting. There will be major challenges associated with how we implement all our commitments, including in respect of innovation in our economy, the digital economy, privacy issues and economic growth that includes all citizens. The ultimate outcome of the conference will be a report of the European Council, and then it will be up to the European Union to implement the recommendations.

The issue of own resources is a sensitive topic for many citizens, but certainly ours. With regard to the multiannual financial framework, there is a very limited own resource in terms of a plastics levy but we have no legally binding commitments to go beyond that.

With regard to accession, negotiations have gone well with the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania but there are difficulties. I believe these can be resolved. The difficulties involving Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia can be dealt with bilaterally and should not hold up discussions. We need to ensure that countries will be compliant and take on and embed the values of the European Union. Why should such states not be members of the European Union?

Brexit negotiations are what they are. People know what the main issues are. They cover market access, governance and fisheries. We constantly express our full support for the negotiating team. It seems to us that it is in everybody's best interest that a deal be done. It would be disastrous for Britain if it left without a deal. It would also be highly damaging for Ireland and the rest of Europe. We hope member states' interests are to the fore. If they are, Britain will reach an agreement.

I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for his comments. It is very easy to talk about a main tier involving the big countries that is going to take over Europe and run our lives. Deputy Howlin

referred to a similar argument being made by the Prime Minister of a small country that is taking on the Presidency of the European Union in January. It is not a case of big countries versus small countries. Every member state, both big and small, has been very supportive of Ireland in regard to Brexit. Every time their representatives open their mouths on Brexit, the two priorities are the Good Friday Agreement and the Single Market. The solidarity has been tremendous.

Deputy Richmond said there are two speeds in that we are in the eurozone but not a full participant in respect of defence. Regarding various policy issues that arise daily or monthly, various groups come together where there is a common interest. Spain and Italy come together on issues of funding. Generally speaking, there is a group including countries that support further cohesion funding. There is the famous Frugal Four, or formerly the Frugal Five. This involves a mix of countries, not all of them big. Germany and France are not part of Frugal Four. Ireland would come together with a group of like-minded nations on fishing. This is a really important issue for Ireland. It is a much more important issue for those states by the Irish Sea or North Sea than for those along the Mediterranean. It is just a different issue. We come together as issues arise but things are worked out in that complicated way in the European Council and European Parliament which, generally speaking, works out very successfully. The notion that it is a big country versus a small country is absolutely not the case and is not my experience of how things operate.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The contention had been made that one would be left behind. I suppose I might have overplayed the caveats that I had. All of the speakers did say that there will be a two-speed Europe and from their point of view the only group that one needs to be in is where the big players are. Previously, Britain stayed outside so, to a degree, it gave protection to people who did not necessarily want to be in the top tier.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Undoubtedly, we want to be at the heart of Europe and do not want a federal Europe. That gives us power and business strength.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes, there are dangers and definite benefits.

Chairman: Go raibh maith agaibh. Next up is Teachta Seán Haughey agus, ina dhiadh sin, Seanadóir Regina Doherty.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I thank the Minister of State for his attendance this morning.

On Brexit, other speakers have drawn attention to issues in their own areas and I am interested to see a report by Transport Infrastructure Ireland as it has concerns about the situation in Dublin Port with trucks arriving from the United Kingdom. The TII has asked Irish Ferries and Stena Line to stagger their arrival times but without much success. The suggestion is that there will be a major snarl up of traffic in the Dublin Port tunnel, the M50 and the surrounding road networks, including motorways. That would be an issue of concern. Stena Line has raised concerns about the location of checkpoints in Dublin Port. I note that Transport Infrastructure Ireland has set up a committee, a traffic management group, to consider the issue. I appreciate that this is a matter for the Department of Transport but I say to the Minister of State that this is a crucial issue. There is nothing surer that the citizens of Dublin will be very upset if the traffic is snarled up from day one because of the position in Dublin Port. That is something we need to look at seriously at this stage and prevent any problems arising.

I note what the Minister of State said about treaty change. I support his view that the Gov-

ernment does not favour treaty change. As he will have heard, this committee has discussed the Conference on the Future of Europe for several weeks with various points of view brought forward. Some Members have suggested that we do not need treaty change, that we could exploit the existing treaties, including the Lisbon treaty. In that regard, the issue of public health has certainly come on the agenda in the last year. Does he see scope for public health becoming a competency of the European Union or is it a question of co-ordinating existing policies?

On consulting the citizens here in Ireland, the Minister of State made reference to Citizens' Assemblies and dialogues. We are familiar with the citizens' dialogues that took place in 2018 and 2019. They were organised by European Movement Ireland whose representatives have been before this committee to say how that worked. Has he firmed up on how he wishes to consult with the citizens here in Ireland? Obviously consultation with and engagement by citizens is really important. Does he envisage something similar to 2018 and 2019 where citizens' dialogues were used or has he other ideas in mind? When will he make a decision on that? Will he wait for the formal structure to be put in place or is he giving consideration to that at this time?

Several speakers have raised the issue of common values and the rule of law so I will not go into that. I will make a final point about something that the Minister of State said in his last contribution on alliances across the European Union. I think he said that Ireland is part of informal alliances for fishing. Can he please give more detail on what alliances, informal or otherwise, we are involved in within the European Union? What issues have we come together on with other EU states? Presumably, agriculture is another one and the protection of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. I know that it is all very informal and he will not be quoted by other EU states about formal alliances and so forth. I am interested in hearing his views because the UK is leaving the European Union, which is a big loss from the point of view of an ally for several issues. What alliances does he see Ireland, as a nation State, becoming informally involved in? What are the issues in that regard?

Senator Regina Doherty: I thank the Minister of State for coming here and sharing his views this morning. The future of Europe was a germ of an idea that started many moons ago to bring Europe and the EU closer to the people of the European Union yet here we are, years later, still having a difference of opinion, tussle or disagreement as to what we should do from a policy perspective. If there was ever a sign of a need to change how we do things and become closer to the people, it is that we need a hell of a lot more action but an awful lot less talking about what is going on. The human rights veto that is being used by particular countries to hide and mask their infringements on human rights is probably a discussion that we could have collectively and individually, as member states, as to how to protect our people and bring the European Union closer.

I hope that we are coming to the end of a very long and arduous Brexit negotiation process. Please God, it will bring forward not something that we will be happy with but something that we will be able to tolerate, and live with, from a trade perspective. I am curious as to what plans, if any, have been put in place by the European Union officialdom and all of our agencies to continue our relationship with the parts of the United Kingdom that specifically voted to stay such as Scotland and Northern Ireland. I am not specifically talking about trade. I am talking about alliances where, as nation member states and neighbours, we need to continue to co-operate with each other.

In terms of the climate action proposals, I am lucky enough to be part of a research group that is helping the Scottish Government to create plans for it to reach out to the rest of the European Union and Europeans to make sure that we do not forget that they are still our neighbours

and did not choose to leave. What plans has the European Union to continue to foster its relationships with Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and, indeed, England well beyond the trade plans that will come out of Brexit?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I take on board what was said about traffic in Dublin. That is why I visited the ports of Rosslare and Dublin. For Dublin Port, substantial planning has been done and co-ordinated by Dublin City Council. I have checked this matter on a regular basis. One can have all the arguments about rules of origin but the face of Brexit will be a lorry driver stuck in traffic or a fisherman stuck on a boat depending on which flag he or she sails under. This is a crucial issue. The Department of Transport and the Taoiseach have been constantly checking that this is going to be okay. We have been assured that it is but will check it again on foot of what has been just said.

In terms of the location of checkpoints in Dublin Port, a massive amount of work and building has been done on Dublin Port. We are not building it from scratch. Due to Brexit one must place checkpoints on a site that was never designed for them so they are located in different locations, and we must comply with the European Union's customs code. There are a lot of constraints and difficulties in terms of building infrastructure. Much of what will come by lorry container will be registered in advance and these items are computerised. Essentially, the Revenue Commissioners will check items they believe need to be checked, and they already do that to some extent when looking for contraband etc.

For example, a lorry driver on a ferry coming over here will have an app for this. When the driver sees Tusker Rock lighthouse, a notification will come up on the phone that is green, orange or red. If the notification is green, the driver knows he or she can more or less just go straight off the boat and there does not have to be a physical customs check, although it will be documented. If the notification is red, the driver will have to go to a particular location either in Dublin Port or Kilrane if the driver is coming into Rosslare Port. It is a similar distance in either case, although the driver technically goes outside the port in Rosslare.

It is not the case that every lorry will be checked and much of the checking will be done online. There will be difficulties, including with the checking of animals. Items that would not be allowed into the European Union, deal or no deal, would cause difficulties. We are hoping traffic will not be snarled up but it is a constant issue. I am glad it has been raised here and I will raise it again.

I will not go into the details of the fishing negotiations except to say this is one of the key priorities for us. Economically and on a national scale, this is not a huge element but it is crucial in certain sectors and locations. The Government is acutely conscious of that.

Deputy Haughey mentioned informal alliances. There are quite a few of these. I am not the line Minister so I do not engage directly, but I know from speaking to my European colleagues on items that are important to them that, for example, we are like-minded with a group of 16, mostly small, member states on the importance of the Single Market to us. By the way, that is reassuring to them as well because they want to ensure the Single Market is protected after Brexit. It is very much in our interest.

There was mention of agriculture and France has been a traditional ally on such matters, as members know, and we can also see Spain and Greece in that group. With the fishing issue, there are coastal states affected by Brexit, generally taking in Spain up to Denmark. I certainly know that geography. Portuguese boats may fish in Norwegian waters, for example, so al-

though it is affected by Brexit, it would not amount to the same concerns as ours. I learned this by speaking to my Portuguese colleague.

There is a rule of law group and the committee will be delighted to hear we are a member of that. It comprises Germany and the Benelux countries, and it is a strong rule of law group. It is my intention to remain vocal on the matter. France and the Nordic countries are also strong. These are themes that would also arise in bilateral meetings.

We are also part of a climate group with Nordic and Baltic countries as well as France. I believe a public joint statement was made by those member states and it would have involved the line departments. There is another climate group that includes other countries that may have difficulties in agreeing some matters, but we are on the side of the angels in this regard.

There are informal alliances on policy matters and there are also political alliances that involve our political parties. They are useful in the national interest, so every party is able to liaise with other groups. Fianna Fáil is part of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, ALDE, group and there is also the EPP group. There is the group for socialists, of which the Labour Party is a member, and Sinn Féin is also in a group. I apologise but the name escapes me. These are very useful engagements for all parties.

It is no harm to set out some of the health initiatives, if I have time. Everybody has seen that the European Union has played a key role dealing with Covid-19. The joint purpose in the vaccine, for example, will bring major benefits for a small country. There are six agreements either signed or about to be signed, ensuring everybody in the European Union will have access to a vaccine. This is transformative, and it would not be possible for us as a country on our own. There is also travel co-ordination, and there has been and will continue to be financial support. The conference on the future of Europe will support a greater run in public health and health in general.

We are open to exploring these matters. Whenever trade agreements are discussed in the Dáil or in public, or when European Union treaties are similarly discussed, somebody always argues there is a hidden privatisation agenda that will take over all our hospitals and they will all be run for profit over public health. Inevitably, if there is any increase in the competences of the European Union in a health perspective, we will have to deal with the argument. We would defeat the argument successfully, but we will have to deal with it. Such arguments have always been completely false but we can see the European Union working for the public and public health. We are trying to protect each and every one of our citizens through a vaccine, which is very welcome and I hope the public responds positively.

With regard to Senator Doherty's comments on plans in place to continue the relationships with parts of the UK that had hoped to stay, Northern Ireland is officially part of the United Kingdom and we want the strongest possible relationship there. We do not want a border and it is not going to happen. We want the movement of goods to be as free as it always has been. We want people to move for educational purposes, for example. It is one island and I certainly consider it one country. The North-South Ministerial Council has been effectively reactivated and does really positive work. There is much work going in various departments with colleagues from the North, which is really welcome.

The British-Irish Council has been reactivated, which is really useful, as that includes devolved governments from the North, Scotland, Wales and the Crown dependencies as well, including the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. It is a really useful engagement. There is also

the shared island initiative that has been set up in the Department of the Taoiseach under the programme for Government. It is really important. The bottom line is that although the United Kingdom is leaving the European Union, it is in all our interests to maintain the best possible relationship. The relationship is in a kind of holding pattern and the plane is flying over the airport, waiting to land, but it has not landed yet. It is in a difficult place currently and there are some very frustrating issues being discussed. The relationship must be reset in the new year and I know this committee and the Government will be more than happy to do whatever it takes to do this.

The ties that bind are incredible and we have so many links. Even last night I retweeted a tweet about a Manx-speaking school in the Isle of Man. Its Gaelic language is a variation of ours. There are many links, with hundreds of thousands of Irish citizens in Britain, so the links must be maintained in all our interests.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I had a question on consultation with the public here in Ireland and when there might be a decision on that.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Ultimately, we will have to wait for the format of the conference to be agreed. The European Council and European Parliament would have to agree on how this will work. Our view is very strongly that it would involve citizens from the ground up. That would be decided on a European level, but I imagine it would be up to us, particularly the Oireachtas and this committee, to put that in place. I am certainly getting my ideas across to my colleagues as to what form that should take. There should be an informed debate among citizens. It must be from the ground up and it cannot just involve the great and the good alone. There is a place for everybody and citizens must be involved. I am making that case to my ministerial colleagues. I am sure the Chairman will put forward the committee's views to the conference of parliamentary committees and European colleagues. They will also be part of the decision process. We must all do our bit but there must be strong citizen engagement on relevant issues.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I wish the Minister of State good luck in his portfolio of responsibility for European affairs. I also wish, Colm Markey, our new MEP, the very best in his new role.

My question is about citizen engagement, dialogue and a citizens' assembly. If I were not sitting at this table, I would not know anything about the upcoming future of Europe conference. How is the Government going to do it? The challenge we face with the pandemic is that it is not possible to meet in person. Teleconferencing poses challenges for citizen engagement. There are multiple crises facing the EU, whether it be health, employment, unemployment, environment, defence, human rights and the EU's future responses to pandemics. Whether we like it, pandemics now come every ten to 15 years. We do not want to erode democracy. If it is going to be online, what has the Government done to engage with citizens online? What will the Minister of State's role be in Ireland with engaging with the citizen?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It was remiss of me not to remember Colm Markey. Senator Keogan was good enough to send her good wishes to him in his new job. As I served on Louth County Council with him, I wish him all the best.

I welcome what the Minister of State said on real action and real issues. Often one can get caught up in procedure and there is a huge distance between citizens and European institutions. I accept the Minister of State is looking at a citizens' assembly scenario in engaging with citi-

zens because that has worked before to a point. How does he foresee the Oireachtas and this committee engaging in that process?

On the whole idea of economic recovery, has the Minister of State seen the shape and nature of that change? He said that some people are overly concerned about the privatisation drive from Europe. However, there is a fear about this and Europe being against state intervention. To a degree, this had to be turned on its head with this pandemic. It is to be hoped that people can now see the reality and necessity for governmental state interventions. Does the Minister of State see Europe going in that direction with almost a shift change in policy?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I join Senator Keogan in wishing the new MEP, Colm Markey, the very best in the European Parliament. I am sure he will do a fantastic job. It is a wonderful opportunity as well as a huge honour for him.

In terms of citizen engagement, we would much prefer to have public meetings. If the vaccine is rolled out, then we will have public meetings. As a young political nerd, I attended meetings on the Nice treaty back in the early 2000s before I was ever really involved in electoral politics. I remember being at a packed meeting at the Westcourt Hotel in Drogheda. It was a good model as there were many people at it. This was for the Nice treaty, one which might not have engaged people as much.

The Lisbon treaty referendum failed. What happened then was this committee, of which I was a member at the time, engaged with the issues and asked what were the problems the public had with it which caused it to vote “No”. The Government did its own research as well. Those issues were addressed at the subsequent referendum. Whenever one hears people say we had to revote on that treaty, we did but we addressed the four key issues which the public stated had determined why they had voted “No”. We have loads of examples. I mentioned the citizens’ assembly as a way of engaging with citizens. That can happen.

I was at the forum on the future of Europe at Dublin Castle. I am not sure that is the best locale for this type of thing. The Westcourt Hotel in Drogheda or the parish hall in Duleek would be much more preferable.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What about the Carrickdale Hotel?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We will be up in that area in a few weeks. We will not be able to invite much of the public there. I will meet the political representatives there.

It has to happen on the ground. The Department of Foreign Affairs has recently given a contract to The Wheel, the national representative body of voluntary groups, to encourage engagement with the civic society and community sector and help it access European Union funding. This will be launched today. I cannot remember what time as I have so much on but it is on Twitter.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Is it on at 10.30 a.m.?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: No, it is not on at 10.30 a.m. Members can log on to see the launch. They can also encourage their community groups which would be in a position to look for European funding to log on to this. They have a big job to do and we want them to do it well. We want to ensure that European Union funding reaches communities. That is another example of European engagement.

We will have legitimate debates on state intervention. The European Union has always been neutral on whether something is publicly or privately owned. Traditionally, European Union policy in the treaties has been not to give an unfair advantage to one company over another as that generally distorts the market and does not work well. These are the types of policy that failed in the 1970s in Britain where it picked out particular companies. Those rules have been eased off a bit in the context of the pandemic, obviously. If a no-deal Brexit is as disastrous as we fear, we will also be looking for further easing of them to deal with the emerging situation.

Deputy Ó Murchú is correct. There has been a sea change at European and global level in this regard. More than ten years ago, we had the banking crisis. The priority was to save the banks. To be honest, that was handed down. It was a terrible policy which many countries were forced to adopt. That has changed, however. The genuine effort now seems to be to protect the citizen. We are giving pandemic unemployment payments, which are significantly greater than the regular dole. We are spending as much as we possibly can with the biggest budget ever. That is the same in many European countries as well. The European Union is there at the forefront trying to get people's health protected through vaccine contracts. There has been a sea change for the better and those lessons have been learned. We have to be constantly on our guard as well, however. That is where citizen engagement comes in.

Of course there are items of government decision-making that people criticise and are wrong. This is a pandemic which none of us alive have experienced before. Generally speaking, European governments have reacted really well. The European Union was probably a little bit slow off the mark at the start of pandemic. Again, however, faced with this crisis, travel stopped immediately and people were not able to get together. There were difficulties but the European Union has got things together and is actually providing a really effective response on behalf of all of us. Long may that continue. The public will engage with that as these are real policies that make real differences in their daily lives.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: While he cannot give the entire plan now, how does the Minister of State foresee the future stimulus programme being rolled out?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: This is still under discussion. Agreement was reached at the European Council in July which took five long days and nights. The Taoiseach told me he had two hours' sleep and was back up to have bilateral meetings with colleagues while the negotiations went on. There are procedures that have to be followed. They are being worked on at the moment, particularly by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and other line Departments as to how the money is spent. Obviously, we have the multiannual financial framework which provides certainty to the European Union budgets. There is the Next Generation EU fund, from which we will gain significant amounts of money and which can be spent in key areas. As I understand it, in the first couple of years a Brexit adjustment reserve will be available as well for the benefit of countries most affected by Brexit. We expect to get a significant amount from that fund. The PEACE PLUS programme will be of particular relevance to the Deputy's constituency and to my constituency because Meath can participate in that programme as well, although to a lesser extent. This programme will be significant as well because it is not just European Union money in that the Irish Government and the British Government will be contributing to projects indirectly in County Louth and in the North of Ireland as well. I am looking forward to that programme helping to provide significant economic business.

I would like to make another minor point relating to customs checks. Customs duties generally are paid to the European Union but Ireland does get to retain a percentage of them. That percentage is being increased and that will help to pay for some of the infrastructural work that

we have to do at our border posts as well.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I am tempted to address a number of issues but I will not. On the PEACE funding, the Minister of State will know that up to now the INTERREG and PEACE funding has been overseen by the Special EU Programmes Body, SEUPB, jointly chaired by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in the Republic and the Minister for Finance in Northern Ireland. It is a special EU body. How will it fair post-Brexit? Does the Minister of State know that yet?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I do not know is the honest answer, but there will be similar structures in place. At the end of the day, it is an EU fund that is being co-funded by Ireland separately and by the British Government as well. This type of EU fund-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I know that in regard to the previous PEACE funding the official British Government line was not to ask for it. The official Government line was that it was not going to look for any expenditure item additional because it wanted reductions in the budget but it was agreed that I could make an application on behalf of Ireland to the Commission and they would not object to it. This happened when the UK was a full member of the European Union. I am wondering now about its participation in the governance of the fund now that the UK is not a member of the Union.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I refer the Deputy to the first principles. This was agreed in the multiannual financial framework, MFF, discussions and it formed part of the European Council conclusions from July. It is €120 million fund.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The EU will be in favour of it but the British will not be part of the EU and, therefore, in no way part of that decision.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is what I am saying. It is an EU programme. That is the bottom line. I will ask the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to communicate with the Deputy on the matter. On the first principles, this is a decision taken by the 27 member states of the European Union, not by the United Kingdom. There are likely to be provisions in the withdrawal agreement as well as to how that works. The UK has an obligation to honour its commitment. I will get an exact answer on the matter and communicate it to the Deputy. Governance, in terms of spending the money, is important but we are looking forward to spending that money. The Chairman, Deputy Ó Murchú and Deputies representing Meath will be working to make sure that really good projects are rolled out under that programme, which can bring us together and ameliorate the effects of Northern Ireland, tragically, being forced to leave the European Union by the decision taken in large parts of England which have no connection with the North.

Deputy Seán Haughey: Is there a timeline for the Brexit negotiations and how does the Minister of State envisage they will go over the next few days? There are things that need to happen, including ratifications by national parliaments and the European Parliament.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: There is a phrase “How long is a piece of string?”, but, unfortunately, that cannot apply in this case because there is a deadline. The deadline is 31 December 2020, but that is not a true deadline because as the Deputy says, the agreement has to be translated. I understand that a large part of the agreement, 95%, is drafted and that there are place holders in terms of the outstanding issues that are well-rehearsed at this stage. The agreement will have to be translated and read by every national parliament and the European Parliament.

The European Parliament will need to give its approval to it and, why not? They are our democratically-elected representatives. Even if that delays the process by a day or two, it is crucial we get that approval separate from the approval of the member states of the European Union. That is the time pressure. I am not in a position to give an exact date. There are many dates floating around but we are close to the wire now. All joking aside, it will lead us into a dangerous place if the negotiations are not concluded soon. While we have the Northern Ireland protocol - I am glad to say that implementation of that has picked up apace since September and the atmosphere at the talks on the EU-UK joint and specialised committees on the withdrawal agreement and the Northern Ireland protocol have been good and better in recent weeks and months - it would be preferable, even for the Northern Ireland protocol, to have the trade deal before the agreement with Britain and the European Union. It would make things a lot easier. Time is running out. As I said, I am not in a position to give the Deputy an exact timeline.

Chairman: I would like to make a number of observations and to pose a particular question to the Minister of State, in regard to which, if he does not have the detail, he might ask his officials to communicate with the committee.

EU solidarity has been rock solid around the entire Brexit issue and process. There has been no shortage of examples of EU representatives familiarising themselves with the real pinch issues for Ireland as a country, with a particular focus on the Border. The Dutch ambassador and the Danish ambassador came to Donegal. I know other ambassadors did too but I met the Dutch and Danish ambassadors when they were in the county. Angela Merkel took time out to meet people on the ground, including, for example, George Mills from Culdaff, a strong advocate for the hauliers, and Kathleen Gillespie from Derry who lost her husband during the Troubles. There was a concerted effort by representative voices throughout Europe and within the Commission to familiarise themselves with the main issues.

There were strong citizenship engagement platforms organised by the Department of Foreign Affairs. I do not know how meetings were held but there were a lot of them on a sectoral or issue-led basis. The citizens' engagement was specifically on the act of doing. As the Minister of State pointed out, there has to be a relevance to the discussion around the future of Europe. We can have town hall meetings to talk about the future but the future will be about current issues. There is no shortage of pinch points and relevant issues that we have to deal with for our citizens.

In opening up a discussion on the future of Europe we can get into very dangerous territory because people will question the validity and relevance of how it affects and impacts on their lives in the current times. I will give an example. The issue that is playing on the minds of hauliers is not Border checks, but an issue arising with regard to the certificate of professional competence, CPC. The majority of hauliers got their certification in England and they have been driving on that basis for decades but there is now an insistence that they retrain and undertake another certification of competence which may take up to six months. That costs money. Hauliers and people involved in the industry see this as a revenue-creating exercise and one short on common sense. I ask the Minister of State and his officials to follow up on this matter on behalf of the committee. This is an area in which we can instil confidence in terms of being responsive and active in the interests of hauliers who are going to be facing a number of challenges come 1 January. This is an added issue in respect of which we need to be responsive and vigilant. I ask the Minister of State to highlight this matter with his officials as one on which the Government will need to react swiftly.

The final issue I want to raise is one I raised a previous meeting, that is, the start-up relief for

entrepreneurs, SURE, fund, which the Minister of State will know is a €100 billion loan fund to mitigate against unemployment risk as a result of Covid. To date, €31 billion has already been disbursed to Italy, Spain, Poland, Greece, Croatia, Lithuania, Cyprus, Slovenia, Malta and Latvia. I note there is an application by Ireland. Could the Minister of State confirm that figure? If he does not have the figure, could he get back to the committee on it? Most importantly, when will this funding be disbursed to Ireland? It is an important fund for temporary jobs and short-term jobs, especially as the PUP payment now will be stretched out until the end of March. We will need much more support post March as well.

The Minister of State mentioned an issue to do with the rule of law and the role of national parliaments. We asked the Commissioner, Mr. Didier Reynders, a question at a recent meeting on the rule of law about the publication of a report on the rule of law and the role of national parliaments. This issue was also raised by a number of parliaments and we will await feedback on that.

Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit arís as ucht teacht inár láthair inniu. Guím gach rath air agus ar a chomhghleacaithe uilig sna laethanta atá romhainn, laethanta atá iontach tábhachtach don todhchaí agus a bhfuil práinn ag baint leo. Gabhaim buíochas leo uilig.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will come back to the Chairman on the matter of professional qualifications. Certain professional qualifications are subject to the negotiations as we speak. I will have to come back to the Chairman on that one.

As I understand it, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform made an announcement within the past week or so on our drawdown from the SURE fund. Of course that is a loan and not a grant. Thankfully, our financial position means we are able to borrow from other places but, as I understand it, there has been a drawdown. I will get the Chairman the exact position.

On the rule of law, it is not my role to tell the committee what to do about it. I am keen for discussions on the rule of law and human rights to take place, particularly in the new year when the transition period for Brexit finally ends and that is not number one on our agenda in this country. It is important that we are a strong voice for the rule of law and human rights in the EU. I strongly encourage, and indeed the General Affairs Council strongly encourages, national parliaments to take a strong stance on that and to be involved. As I have said, Mr. Reynders has said that he will address committees, etc. That is a matter for the committee. Mr. Reynders is more than happy to do whatever the committee wants to do. This needs to happen. We need good debates in this committee, in the Dáil and in the Seanad on those issues. If we do not put a stop to people breaking these rules or not complying with the rule of law, or indeed human rights requirements or general common decent values, we will end up in a very bad place. It is really important to us.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I remind the Minister of State that it is from 2.30 p.m. to 4.30 p.m. He has not made it.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I would not be accused of looking at my phone.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I had an excuse for checking through the Minister of State's Twitter feed.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: There are Dáil votes as well. There are no pairs now. We have been over in the convention centre. That complicates what we do.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am meant to be in two committees at the same time.

The CPC, which was raised by the Chairman, became a big issue because it was reiterated on Thursday that people could not get a direct transfer and would have to sit examinations. It could take two weeks. People are talking about the possibility of relocating. I accept it is all probably contained within the negotiations but I imagine it is also something in a worst-case scenario that could be sorted with temporary recognition and the ability to transfer. It just needs to happen.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will take that on board.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister of State to come back on it.

Chairman: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit arís agus a chomhghleacaithe.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: One thing I have noticed is the work that is done by officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs in terms of making the links with other countries and setting forth our views and making the path smooth for us. I want to thank all the officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Chairman: The next meeting of the joint committee will be held on Wednesday, 2 December, at 9 a.m.

The joint committee adjourned at 10.54 a.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 2 December 2020.