

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FEIDHMIÚ CHOMHAONTÚ AOINE AN CHÉASTA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY
AGREEMENT

Déardaoin, 21 Meán Fómhair 2017

Thursday, 21 September 2017

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 10.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Seán Barrett,	Ivana Bacik,
Declan Breathnach,	Paul Coghlan,
Seán Crowe,	Gerard P. Craughwell,
Bernard J. Durkan,	Mark Daly,
Seán Haughey,	Frank Feighan,
Michael Healy-Rae,	Terry Leyden,
Mattie McGrath,	Niall Ó Donnghaile.
Tony McLoughlin,	
Darragh O'Brien,	
Fergus O'Dowd,	
Frank O'Rourke,	
Maureen O'Sullivan,	
Sean Sherlock,	
Brendan Smith.	

I láthair/In attendance: Deputies Gerry Adams, Bobby Aylward, Richard Boyd Barrett, John Brady, John Brassil, James Browne, Pat Buckley, Mary Butler, Jackie Cahill, Pat Casey, Shane Cassells, Lisa Chambers, Niall Collins, David Cullinane, John Curran, Pearse Doherty, Stephen

JIGFA

Donnelly, Timmy Dooley, Dessie Ellis, Martin Ferris, Pat The Cope Gallagher, Seamus Healy, Heather Humphreys, Martin Kenny, John Lahart, Catherine Martin, Micheál Martin, Helen McEntee, Joe McHugh, Denise Mitchell, Aindrias Moynihan, Michael Moynihan, Imelda Munster, Margaret Murphy O'Mahony, Jim O'Callaghan, Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire, Maurice Quinlivan, Anne Rabbitte, Brendan Ryan, Eamon Ryan, Eamon Scanlon, Niamh Smyth and Brian Stanley and Senators Máire Devine, Alice-Mary Higgins, Michael McDowell and An Cathaoirleach (Senator Denis O'Donovan).

An Ceann Comhairle sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

Special Meeting of the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs meeting with the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence and the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement

Engagement with Mr. Guy Verhofstadt MEP, European Parliament Brexit Co-ordinator

An Ceann Comhairle: A Theachtaí agus a Sheanadóirí, fáilte romhaibh go léir. On this special occasion, I also extend a heartfelt welcome to our MLAs, MEPs and MPs who join us for this special meeting of three Oireachtas committees, the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs, the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence and the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. The purpose of the meeting is to engage in an exchange of views with Mr. Guy Verhofstadt, the European Parliament's co-ordinator on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

Mr. Verhofstadt, I welcome you to the Houses of the Oireachtas and invite you to take your seat in the Chamber. You honour us with your visit to our Parliament today. We are pleased to welcome you for this important discussion.

By way of background, Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann, sitting together in committee on 11 May last, met Mr. Michel Barnier, chief negotiator of the task force for the preparation and conduct of negotiations with the United Kingdom. The meeting provided an opportunity for Members of the Dáil and Seanad to outline directly to Mr. Barnier their concerns for Ireland in relation to the negotiation process and its outcome. Ireland's priorities include Northern Ireland, the Border and the Good Friday Agreement; the economic impact of Brexit, which has already manifested itself in the agrifood sector; the Single Market; and free movement, in particular of people in the common travel area. As a result, the negotiations between the United Kingdom and European Union are being followed very closely in Ireland. Mr. Verhofstadt, as the European Parliament's co-ordinator, has a key role in framing and presenting the final UK exit package to the European Parliament.

The unique position of and special circumstances confronting the island of Ireland were referenced in the European Parliament's resolution of 5 April on the exit negotiations. This early recognition of the challenges facing Ireland is welcome and reassuring but we need to maintain this focus. While the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU has clear implications for Ireland, it also draws our attention again to the debate about the future of Europe and any changes that may emerge from the process now under way. Mr. Verhofstadt, as you will hear, this is an issue of crucial importance to all of us, as parliamentarians representing our citizens who share a deep concern about where this bumpy road will lead us, as citizens of Ireland and Europe. We are very interested in hearing your views on the process, the potential outcomes of the negotiations and the implications for the European Union. I have great pleasure in asking you to address this unique meeting of the joint committees.

Mr. Guy Verhofstadt: Thank you very much a Cheann Comhairle, a Chathaoirligh and chairs and members of the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs, Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence and the joint committee in relation to the negotiations under article 50 of the Treaty on European Union. It is an honour for me to be here today and address you in this historic Dáil Chamber. I thank all of you for giving me the opportunity to address you here today because I am aware that it is not every day that a Member of the Euro-

pean Parliament responsible for such an important matter can address a meeting of joint committees of the Oireachtas.

I first want to deliver a message of solidarity with Ireland, its citizens and people. We will never allow Ireland to suffer as a result of the British decision to leave the European Union. That is a commitment given by the European Parliament and European Union as a whole. I will come back to this later in my contribution.

Next year, it will be exactly 20 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Yesterday was the first time I visited Belfast. It was a strange experience because for the past 20 years, we in the rest of Europe have not seen anything about Belfast on our television screens. It is good to remember that because it is 20 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The Agreement is not a practical arrangement on passports, borders, customs or tariffs - it is not about these matters - but an agreement about peace and the reconciliation of divided communities. It is about rebuilding confidence and trust.

The Good Friday Agreement is also a successful innovation of citizenship itself. Personally, I find the following sentence to be the most important sentence in the Agreement. It is “the birthright of all the people in Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may choose”. In my opinion, these four simple words, “as they may choose”, go against the outdated version of some states that do not like ambiguity, contingency or multiplicity. They give to the people and individual citizens, rather than states, the power to choose their own destiny. They are four simple words which have brought peace and stability to Northern Ireland based on openness and a common understanding that identities are multi-layered and complex and should bring people together rather than divide them. In my opinion, these four simple words not only define Northern Ireland but Ireland as a whole.

I know that some British politicians, not to name Boris Johnson, criticise their countrymen and women for wanting to keep their European identity. He even accused them of split allegiance. This is a binary, old-fashioned and reductionist understanding of identity. We need to be smarter and more open and inventive than that. It is not one’s origin or the fact that, by accident, one was born in this or that village, city or country that makes one a good citizen. It is the fact that one embraces the values of one’s community and cherishes the fundamental rights and freedoms of the society in which one lives. These are values, rights and freedoms that are common in our European Union in all nations and in every one of our member states so I think it is nonsense to talk about a split allegiance. It is perfectly possible, I think, but I have not practised it, to feel English, British and European at the same time and it is perfectly normal to be a Dubliner, Irish and European at the same time without being schizophrenic. There is no question of split allegiance. It is this vision that needs to be defended by our European Union just as the Union needs to defend, and this is my second point, that there is no return to the past to a time of hard borders on our Continent, and certainly not to a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Members will know that is a point we made very clear in the European Parliament’s resolutions adopted on 5 April 2017.

I am not mistaken when I state that the Irish Border is in no way a natural one. It is not a river or a mountain ridge. It meanders for 310 miles through meadows, forests and farmlands. It cannot be securely poised and is, therefore, an illogical divide. The Border should at least remain invisible just as it is today. It is a little bit visible because one can see a marking in yellow when one enters the Irish Republic. The colour of the marking changes from white to yellow. That is the big lesson that I learned yesterday.

I spent yesterday afternoon visiting the Border in County Monaghan where I met people who live and work there. At one point, I stood astride the Border, with one foot in Northern Ireland and my other foot in the Republic. I found it completely impossible to see where one jurisdiction ended and the other started. Certainly, the cows could not see it. The cows from the North ate grass in the South, they were milked in the North by a farmer from the South and their milk was bottled in the South. I am a Belgian so surrealism comes naturally to me. To re-instate a border would be more than surreal, it would be totally absurd, even for me.

There are borders and then there are borders. Borders can be lines on maps, physical barriers or, worst of all, can run through people's hearts and minds. These are the worst kind of borders because they breed division, discrimination and hostility. I remind everyone, if I may, that the history of Europe is in many ways a history of borders. Over the centuries our Continent has seen borders shift, disappear and re-appear. As a liberal, my natural inclination is to be against borders. It seems to me that borders are best when they are just lines on maps. In many ways, the European Union is all about reducing borders to lines on maps and this is certainly the case, I think, for Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. The Border between both jurisdictions created chaos, hate and violence. To reduce it to a line on a map was a crucial achievement 20 years ago in which the European Union, the UK and Ireland played a decisive role. I saw the results for myself yesterday. Whether one is speaking about the economy, commerce, agriculture, health or other social services, the Border is featuring less and less as a factor in the economic and social life of the region, and that is precisely its greatest achievement. It is a border that does not divide people but enables them to live together in peace. It is a border that is not divisive, that does not run through people's hearts but instead does the opposite and creates a common purpose.

Dear colleagues - if I may use those words as a parliamentarian - you know better than I that Ireland underwent a dramatic transformation over the past three decades economically and also socially. The Republic was a country defined by Catholicism and nationalism. In 1973, the birth year of the current Prime Minister, only 7% of Irish were born abroad and today this number is 17%, which makes Ireland very diverse when compared with European standards. The Irish economy has successfully integrated migrants from all over the world, from Poland to Nigeria. Ireland is also the home of international IT giants. All of this is an example, I think, of constructive and fair globalisation. To summarise it, Ireland is no longer a nation of immigration but a country of destination.

Ireland has gained a lot of self-confidence over the past decades, and rightly so. We, as a European Union, also share that. Let us never forget that Europe is far more than co-operation between the two old enemies of France and Germany. Today, Europe goes beyond a Franco-German relationship. We need all hands on deck. All 27 member states are needed to make Europe work because we belong to the same European civilisation. Europe would not be half of what it is today without dynamic countries like Ireland, countries that have dealt with complex border and identity issues, and countries that were able to re-invent themselves with a respect for tradition, so Ireland is crucial to the Union.

The Irish Border and all things related are a priority in the negotiations. In the new resolution that the European Parliament will adopt in early October we will state that Ireland must not pay the price for Brexit and that Ireland or any other member state will not be used as a bargaining chip in the negotiations. The interests of Ireland are part and parcel of the interests of the EU 27. The Irish position is the European position and the European position is the Irish position.

In this joint position, let me also make one last thing very clear. The re-emergence of the Border question between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic has not been caused by the Irish Republic or the rest of the European Union. The issue is the inevitable consequence of the choice by Britain to leave the European Union so the resolution of this issue is entirely the responsibility of the United Kingdom. It is for them to come up with a workable solution, one which safeguards the Good Friday Agreement, preserves the common travel area, avoids a hardening of the Border and last, but not least, does not compromise Irish membership and the integrity of the Single Market and the customs union. In my opinion, this can only be a unique solution. Most of the people I met yesterday, on both sides of the Border, believe that this unique solution requires that one way or another Northern Ireland should remain part of the customs union and the Single Market. I know the UK Government, in its paper on Ireland and Northern Ireland, has rejected this idea. That is fair enough, but the UK must come forward with another proposal that avoids any disruption. Simply saying that the problem will be solved by using new technology is, in my opinion, not convincing.

I am pleased to say that the Irish MEPs, some of whom are here today and seated in the corner, are working very hard to defend all of this, a position I can assure the members is shared right across the whole European Parliament. We know the Irish people have made the choice to be a core member state of the EU and, because of this, we will never let them down. The EU also needs their help to reform Europe because that is something we also urgently need to do. I think that Brexit is an ideal moment to reflect on the future of the Union we belong to. There are enough challenges ahead, challenges that transcend national borders such as climate change, international terrorism and remaining economic difficulties. These are all issues that individual countries cannot tackle on their own. Currently, they have also recognised that Europe is too weak to take on these challenges. In order for us to beat, for example, international terrorism, we need European capabilities. To overcome the economic crisis, we need a banking union to clean up our banks and a fiscal union to protect our single currency, the euro. To fight the protectionism of President Trump and Brexit, we must have a Europe that is vocal and strong on the world stage.

To conclude, I believe that Brexit has opened the eyes of many people. Do not misunderstand me - people are still very critical of the European Union, and for good reason. However, nobody wants to leave and destroy Europe. On the contrary, it is fair to say there is a renewed belief in Europe, not in this Europe but in a different, reformed Europe. In any case, people have started voting pro-European again. They did it in Austria, the Netherlands, and France and soon, hopefully, they will do so in Germany. However, these are not votes for a *status quo*. This is a way of people saying, “Look, we are giving you one last chance to make Europe work and to make it better and fit for the future”, or, in the words of Seamus Heaney, we “Believe that further shore/Is reachable from here”.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Mr. Verhofstadt. You never fail to interest your audience. You gave an interesting, profound and stimulating contribution. I call the Chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae.

Co-Chairman Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is a pleasure to see Mr. Verhofstadt again and to welcome him to Dublin and the Houses of the Oireachtas. The last time we met he welcomed a delegation from the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs to the European Parliament, so I am delighted to be able to join the Ceann Comhairle and the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad in returning the hospitality to him today.

To be blunt, this is a horrible problem. It is a mess, and there is nothing nice about it. People

do not realise how detrimental an effect this will have on their lives and those of their children. The UK's withdrawal from the European Union, the implications for Ireland and the implications for the European Union are all profound. Quite frankly, I was saddened by the decision. However, it was clear and we must respect it. We all must work on the challenges the decision presents. Members of this House have been doing that across a number of committees and the European Parliament has also been doing it. We see the hard, thoughtful and diligent work the European Parliament's committees have been doing in considering Brexit and the Irish MEPs have been playing a strong role in that. I acknowledge their work and thank them for it.

My committee has met a number of stakeholders and Ministers and is following the negotiations carefully through the documentation that is published. I have been heartened by the supportive comments and the positions taken by the European Parliament, many governments and the European Commission. However, the chips are down now. Reality is starting to bite. There are substantial and significant choices to be made by the negotiators and those they represent. Ultimately, Mr. Barnier and his team, Mr. Verhofstadt and the other Members of the European Parliament represent the citizens of Europe, including the citizens of Ireland, who will feel the impact in their daily lives. It is up to all of us to work together on practical solutions to minimise the impact as much as possible on the daily lives of citizens, on the quality of what they eat, the amount they must pay for it, how secure their savings and pensions are, whether they can go to shops or to mass up or down the road without going through border checks, how easily they can study abroad, what prices farmers get for their beef, lamb and milk, what price the consumer must pay for it and whether they can make friends with whoever they wish and set up a home together wherever they wish, be it in London, Brussels, Dublin or Belfast. All of these matters could be impacted upon by Brexit. All of them could be changed into something that resembles the parts of the past that we thought we had left far behind us.

We must work together and remain involved in and practical about the negotiations. We are not alone in this. There are two sides to a negotiation. I had hoped to see more practical and pragmatic suggestions from the British side by now, but perhaps they will come forward. They might even come forward in the Prime Minister's speech. I certainly hope so.

On the European side, the transparent way in which negotiation documents have been shared with citizens is good and must continue. National parliaments must continue to be involved in debates and discussions. I would be interested in any recommendations or ideas Mr. Verhofstadt has to strengthen the relationship between the European Parliament and national parliaments in considering Brexit. For example, is there any intention to hold interparliamentary meetings involving national parliaments and the European Parliament's Brexit steering group? There would be huge value and benefit in that. Mr. Verhofstadt travelled to the Border yesterday and I am delighted that he enjoyed meeting the cows there. I hope this visit will have given him a valuable insight into why we value the current Border arrangements so much and why they should be preserved.

The biggest challenge will be goods. There was an interesting letter in yesterday's edition of the *Financial Times* from a Belgian customs official. It suggested that border goods should be applied for at the Irish Sea and that the customs union rules could be applied by the European Union customs officials operating in ports in Northern Ireland. That was imaginative. Are such suggestions helpful? Of course, it would be best if the UK would decide to stay in the customs union, but that decision is out of our hands. It is one for the United Kingdom.

The economic impact on Ireland is significant. Each time an Oireachtas committee examines a new issue, a new box of challenges is opened - how aeroplanes will land, how goods will

get to the market from Irish ports through Wales and England to eventually reach Belgium and so forth. There are endless challenges. I remain concerned about Brexit for Irish citizens but, as Chairman of the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs, I am also concerned about the impact on the rest of the European Union. Even if Brexit were not on the horizon, it would be important to consider the future of Europe and where we should be going. My committee has started a public consultation process in Ireland and a series of engagements with stakeholders to examine what type of Europe we want in the future.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Co-Chairman Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is clear that Ireland sees its role at the heart of the EU, perhaps not geographically but at the heart and soul of Europe. We care deeply not just about the impact here but also about the impact of the measures throughout the EU.

At the meeting of my committee yesterday, we heard two youth representatives give a powerful presentation on where they see the future of Europe. They want to see a Europe that tackles issues, works together, is sustainable-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We are running out of time.

Co-Chairman Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----uses its collaborative powers and looks beyond the most popular or the easiest. That really struck me. We need a Europe with ambitions that are tempered by the fire of reality in all member states. It is a principle that most people on the street will not explain, but I instinctively support it. We must recognise that. Mr. Verhofstadt has a strong vision for the future of Europe, so I would appreciate knowing more on how he sees us bridging the gap between the ideals and the need to deliver for our citizens. Again, I thank Mr. Verhofstadt for attending this meeting.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Healy-Rae. It is probably a good thing that Mr. Verhofstadt found the cows in Monaghan less aggressive than some of the bovines with which the Deputy interacted in Kerry. I call Deputy Brendan Smith.

Co-Chairman Deputy Brendan Smith: As you know a Cheann Comhairle, everything is good about Monaghan and its neighbouring counties.

I join you and colleagues in extending a warm welcome to Mr. Verhofstadt. I am sure we will find his address and interaction with us today very useful and beneficial. As he will have seen and heard during his visits to Belfast, Monaghan and Dublin, Brexit impacts on every policy area across this island and will have a knock-on effect on the lives of citizens across the European Union and beyond. Ireland, as Mr. Verhofstadt knows, stands to be significantly and disproportionately affected. I speak for the members of our committee when I tell him that we, as public representatives, are greatly concerned at the negative domestic impact Brexit will have on the island of Ireland. I know from listening to what he has said in recent months that he is very aware of and interested in our concerns, a fact demonstrated by his visit, North and South, yesterday and today.

As our committee looks outward in its work, I will focus my remarks on how Brexit impacts on the external environment, however as a Deputy for two Border counties, one of which Mr. Verhofstadt visited yesterday, it would be remiss of me not to remind him of the great damage the resurrection of a border would have on the communities I represent here in the national Parliament. I welcome his comments made yesterday and hope he can expand on them later.

Much of the progress made in the improved Irish-British relations over the past 25 years was due in no small part to our common EU membership. I recall, from my own time as a Minister being told that Irish and British officials were meeting approximately 26 times per day in Brussels. The loss of this high level of ongoing and important interaction with our nearest neighbour and close ally is deeply regrettable. Its loss will be keenly felt. We will be doing our utmost to compensate as best we can for that loss of engagement.

As Mr. Verhofstadt knows, Ireland is militarily neutral but that does not mean that we in Ireland stand aside when it comes to promoting peace and development through the UN, the European Union and our own bilateral actions - far from it. We have a long, proud and strong record in peace support and humanitarian operations via our Defence Forces. At present, 600 members of the Defence Forces are serving on UN-mandated missions across the globe. Given our policy remit for both foreign affairs and defence, our committee knows and recognises the global challenges and security threats we face, both within the EU and in the EU's neighbourhood. For those reasons we recognise a good and strong relationship with Britain on foreign policy, security and defence is essential and is in all our interests. For those reasons, we welcome last week's publication by the British Government of a paper on foreign policy, defence and development, and we are pleased to see the British Government outline its willingness and desire to continue to have a close partnership with the EU on foreign, defence, security and development issues. We note that Britain proposes the exchange of foreign and security policy experts, military personnel and the exchange of classified information to support external actions. Ongoing co-operation is much needed and is common sense in these very fraught times for Europe and neighbouring areas as well.

I wish to refer specifically to development co-operation and the impact Brexit may have on the world's poorest people whose voices are often unheard in these debates. While Brexit may be happening far from the poorest countries in the world, they also stand to be adversely affected. It is unknown what will become of the significant aid contributions Britain makes both to the European Development Fund - at present it contributes 15% of the fund, amounting to €4.48 billion, and 13% of the total of the aid portion of the EU's general budget for 2016, or €1.23 billion. Loss of that substantial British funding would have huge ramifications for the many programmes in the poorest regions of the world which depend so heavily on it. The committee hopes a solution will be found that will allow and encourage Britain to continue to contribute. I believe there are precedents for that with Switzerland and Norway participating in EU-managed trust funds.

Brexit will result in the loss of an important, influential and respected voice on the shaping of EU development policy from around the EU table. Our committee will encourage the Government to step up and play its part in filling those gaps as much as possible. There is also the significant concern that developing countries could lose their duty free, quota free access to British markets, as is currently provided for under EU agreements.

More generally, we are concerned about the Paris Accord and climate action. All those issues must be taken into account in the complex negotiations that lie ahead. I have no doubt the European Parliament will ensure those concerns are brought to the fore in its engagements with the Council and the Commission. As Mr. Verhofstadt said, our island has been transformed since 1998. We cannot countenance any agreement that would set us back or hinder the necessary progress for the further development of all of this island. To echo Mr. Verhofstadt, it would be absolutely absurd to put obstacles in the way of the 30,000 people who cross the Border on a daily basis going about their business.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move to Deputy Declan Breathnach, Vice Chairman of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. He is representing Deputy Kathleen Funchion.

Co-Chairman Deputy Declan Breathnach: I address my remarks to you, a Cheann Comhairle and to parliamentarians of this State, Northern Ireland, Europe and beyond. Today is world International Day of Peace, as designated by the United Nations and that should not be lost on our defining moment in 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent establishment of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement in 2007 to monitor and oversee the ongoing implementation of that historic peace agreement.

I welcome Mr. Verhofstadt to Leinster House. The attendance of the many dignitaries, ambassadors, officials, MPs, MEPs and MLAs, sends out a clear signal of the need for solutions to Brexit and peace and if those solutions can be found on this island our many problems in the EU may also be resolved. I commend the membership of the committee, its officials and witnesses on their ongoing work on Brexit and exploring solutions while remaining extremely cognisant of building on our fragile peace and progressing the many legacy issues.

For many of us there can be various defining moments in our history but for me the main aim of the Treaty of Rome, the forerunner to the EEC or EU, was to ensure that peace not war would unite us in prosperity. I am 59 years of age and was born ten years before the further outbreak of the Troubles in 1969 that broke many families and fractured communities and their prosperity in Northern Ireland, the Border region and beyond. I also remember life pre-EEC and post-EEC membership and the transformation that this great island achieved as a result of EU investment in trade and infrastructure, much of which is ongoing. For all of us in this Chamber and beyond the strides that this country has made have been significantly enhanced by peace, which has encouraged communities North and South to face each other with a common purpose, respect and recognition that there is strength in unity and friendship is what is important.

Politicians will not be forgiven by this generation and future ones if they fail to progress and enhance this fragile peace. Let there be no mistake, Brexit has the potential to derail so many of the gains of this island and we must not allow that to happen. Some key findings of the report from our committee have found that the all-Ireland economy must not be affected or allowed to regress. A tailored solution taking into account its very unique circumstances is required. We are concerned about the commitment to continue both the INTERREG and PEACE programmes, which provided €3.5 billion in the past 20 years. It is important that such a commitment would immediately be set out clearly so that people can plan and communities can continue to prosper from the PEACE moneys.

The committee calls on the Government and the EU to undertake a detailed study on the potential implications of Brexit on reconciliation. Allied to that is the psychological impact identified by the committee that Brexit will further affect many families in the North and along the Border corridor. Whether one has been a victim, a combatant or an innocent bystander the emotional scars of murder, death and explosions remain deep rooted and continue to need healing.

Brexit presents many challenges but there are also opportunities. The committee believes the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement can step up and take on additional responsibilities, including the British-Irish Council and the North-South Ministerial Council, whose remit

needs to be reviewed and enhanced. Like Mr. Verhofstadt, the committee has visited many groups in Northern Ireland who feel they have no voice in the current political stalemate and it is the committee's responsibility to bring those anxieties to his attention. These need to be represented in the all-Ireland debate. Indeed, the absence of unionism and a unionist voice at the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement is regrettable.

Next year will mark the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, widely recognised as the cornerstone of peace. That anniversary takes place at a time of uncertainty in North-South and British-Irish relations. Perhaps it is an opportune time for the EU and the European Parliament to reinvigorate its investment in making our peace process a world model and exemplar that will show war-torn regions around the world how a lasting peace can be achieved. I should add that many representatives of such regions have visited us to look at what we are doing. Politics is about the art of the possible and we owe it to our children and our children's children to live in peace, prosperity and harmony on this island.

Both Mr. Verhofstadt and Mr. Barnier continue to use the term "unique solution" in their deliberations. Will Mr. Verhofstadt suggest what his thoughts are on that solution and what he feels it could look like?

With the Ceann Comhairle's permission, I have been asked by my colleagues from the British Parliament on the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, who are here with us today, to ask Mr. Verhofstadt if he will produce a report on his fact-finding visit after he returns to Brussels. Will he share his experience of the last 48 hours with Mr. Barnier? How concerned does he believe the European Parliament is about the impact of Brexit on the Good Friday Agreement?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. We now move to the Minister of State, Deputy Helen McEntee, on behalf of the Government.

Deputy Helen McEntee: On my own behalf as the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, but also on behalf of the Government, I sincerely welcome Mr. Verhofstadt and his team to Ireland and to the Oireachtas. I welcome our Members of the European Parliament and all the invited guests. I thank our committee Chairs and committee members for organising what has already been described as a unique but very important meeting and gathering.

It is extremely important to thank Mr. Verhofstadt for his willingness to come to Ireland but also, and most importantly, for his willingness to deepen his understanding of the Good Friday Agreement, the peace process and, of course, the Border issues. It is very clear from his statement that he has a very real understanding of how fragile the peace process is. I thank him for his work to date as the European Parliament's lead negotiator on Brexit. As the European Parliament plays such an important role in the Brexit negotiations, it is important to thank him for his supportive statements to date on the peace process and on the Border and for his words of solidarity with the Irish people today.

While Brexit may not be the first priority for all member states, it is, of course, a very real and imminent concern for many Irish citizens, for Irish businesses large and small, and for our industries, in particular the agrifood sector which is already feeling the effect of Brexit. I know that Members here, throughout this debate, will be very keen to hear Mr. Verhofstadt's views and an update on how negotiations are progressing, but also to hear his further views on the future of Europe. The future of Europe is not Brexit. It is a Europe without the UK and we need to ensure it is a Union that protects, empowers and defends its citizens. It is even more

important that this conversation is one that all citizens should be involved in.

I look forward to a very positive engagement with Members and our three committees as, I am sure, does Mr. Verhofstadt. I thank him again for his support and for his recognition of our unique situation.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State. We will now move to a session of questions and answers. In accordance with yesterday's recommendation of the Business Committee I will take blocks of three questions, each lasting approximately two minutes, starting with the party leaders. I will start with Deputy Martin. We will take three questions then return to Mr. Verhofstadt.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank Mr. Verhofstadt for his very illuminating address. I also thank him for his strong support for Ireland, for the manner in which he has facilitated the ALDE group in supporting the Irish cause in respect of Brexit, and for his determination that Ireland would not suffer. In the limited time that is available I will put two key points to Mr. Verhofstadt, if I may. He rightly drew attention to the citizenship dimension of the Good Friday Agreement and the idea of multiple identities - of Irish citizenship and European citizenship. It is extremely important that in the ultimate resolution of this, the idea of Irish citizenship as enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement is protected in the context of the resolution between the European Union and the United Kingdom. In a post-Brexit scenario, Northern Ireland will have the largest concentration of European Union citizens outside of the Union's borders. It is essential that mechanisms are found which will ensure those citizens are in a position to continue to enjoy the rights and privileges of European citizenship.

Second, notwithstanding the British position at the moment in terms of the customs union, which is ultimately the key issue in terms of the Border question, we have been putting forward the idea that a special economic zone needs to be considered. There are many examples of economic zones across the world. Economic zones in themselves do not challenge or undermine the unique constitutional framework of east-west, North-South and the Northern Ireland settlement. In other words, it is possible within the existing constitutional framework to devise an economic zone for the North and the Border counties which would maintain freedom of trade - goods, services and people - North and South. We need to move on from the language of a "frictionless border" or "no border" and start working on concrete ideas and solutions that could ultimately bring a resolution to the issue.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Cuirim fáilte mór roimh an tUasal Verhofstadt. Táimid buíoch de faoi choinne a chuaire. I offer Mr. Verhofstadt a hundred thousand welcomes and thank him for his visit to our island. I welcome the content of his speech very much. In his remarks today, Mr. Verhofstadt acknowledged that people are very critical of the European Union. That is Sinn Féin's position. We want to see a more democratic, demilitarised, peaceful European Union which embraces economic and social justice, international solidarity and an end to poverty. Notwithstanding that, we campaigned in the North for a Remain vote, because it is our view that to have one part of the island outside the European Union and another part inside is just folly. It is a really significant fact which has been ignored by some, but people in the North supported that position. They voted to remain within the EU and we believe that vote should be upheld and actively defended. The various policy positions which the British Government has unveiled, including leaving the customs union, will all cost jobs, undermine the economy and subvert sectors in both parts of the island.

I particularly want to welcome Mr. Verhofstadt's remarks on the Good Friday Agreement. I

know that he values the peace process and I understand he met some of our colleagues: Martina Anderson MEP, our group leader in the European Parliament, our national spokesperson on Brexit, Deputy David Cullinane, and our Members of the European Parliament. His description of the Border and of partition is very much appreciated, as are his warnings of the dire consequences if it is reinforced.

To move on to my questions, will Mr. Verhofstadt give us an assessment of the possibility of agreement, given that there has only been limited information available thus far and that there does not appear to have been any real progress from the British side? I welcome his suggestion that the North remain within the customs union and the Single Market. That is effectively the designated status for the North which we have campaigned for and which the Dáil, the majority of MLAs and the European Parliament support. The threat and the danger to the Good Friday Agreement could be averted if the agreement was incorporated in full as a protocol in the withdrawal agreement. I commend that position to Mr. Verhofstadt and ask him to give his support to that proposition.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I welcome the visit of Mr. Verhofstadt. His engagement with the people of Northern Ireland, particularly those in the Border region, and his comments on enabling Northern Ireland to retain access to the Single Market and customs union are warmly welcomed. I concur with my fellow speakers who have said that by any objective analysis, as co-ordinator Mr. Verhofstadt has displayed a thorough understanding of the dynamics at play on the island of Ireland. He is right when he says that responsibility for finding a solution to the Irish Border question lies with the UK and no realistic proposals have yet emerged from that quarter.

My first question is very simple. Will Mr. Verhofstadt and his colleagues, Mr. Brok and Mr. Gualtieri, consider including within the wording of any final European Parliament resolution a clause that ensures the integrity of the Good Friday Agreement is maintained and the principles of parity of esteem and human rights protection are upheld, especially given that 56% of the population in Northern Ireland voted to remain within the EU? If no such protections are forthcoming from the UK, will the European Parliament veto any outcome that does not satisfy those fundamental rights?

My second question relates to a very good article by Mr. Verhofstadt that was published in *The Observer* on 9 July last, in which he wrote very rationally about the UK position on citizens' rights. He referred particularly to third country nationals, the new status that will pertain in the UK, the need for separate applications for settled status and the five-year residence requirement. This is another simple question. How seriously is the European Parliament taking the UK's negotiating position, which is grossly insulting to any Irish person living in the UK who has settled there for years and has an intergenerational relationship and which will set back the cause of Anglo-Irish relations by years? I would like to know Mr. Verhofstadt's opinion on that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Mr. Verhofstadt to address those questions as briefly as possible.

Mr. Guy Verhofstadt: It is a question of how many minutes I will be given to respond to all the remarks that have been made. I thank the honourable Members and the Chairs of the committees. Maybe I can pick three elements from the various interventions that have been made. Reference was made to the state of the negotiations and I was asked whether we will use our veto. One needs to have something to veto before one can use one's veto. For the mo-

ment, there is nothing to veto because - let us be honest - no real progress has been made in the negotiations. We have had three rounds of negotiations. The first round involved the formal start of negotiations, the second round involved the presentation and the third round involved the clarification. I think it is time for the negotiation in the fourth and fifth rounds. That is what we are hoping for now. Maybe the intervention of the British Prime Minister will lead to a breakthrough in the coming days. Based on the state of play now, those of us on the European Parliament side do not see sufficient progress to call for the so-called "second stage" of the negotiations on the future relationship between the UK and the EU. The sequencing is important because Article 50 of the treaty says that there needs to be an agreement on withdrawal in the first instance before a new relationship can start to be established between the EU and the withdrawing country. Let us be very blunt about it - the first three rounds were very slow. We hope the fourth and fifth rounds in October can speed up the negotiations. It is time for the uncertainty to stop, in the interests of everybody, particularly businesses and citizens. This uncertainty is having a negative impact on the hearts and minds of citizens and on daily economic life. The only way to stop it is to go forward in the negotiations.

The second point I want to make relates to the Good Friday Agreement. The European Parliament has made it very clear from day one - it pushed this in the guidelines of the European Council - that the wording of the Good Friday Agreement should be included in all its parts. This has been a request from the European Parliament. Keeping the integrity of the Good Friday Agreement is a key element for us. We cannot risk the possibility of Brexit creating a return to the Troubles that we saw in the past. That is a key element for this whole negotiation. I found that this point - the risk to the Good Friday Agreement posed by the Brexit discussion - was not touched on sufficiently during the whole debate before the referendum in Britain. I accept that this is in the past now. Ireland can count on the European Parliament to defend the integrity of the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts. We will never allow whatever solution is reached to put that in danger. As the EU played an important role in the Good Friday Agreement, it is keen to defend its own work and its own achievements.

The third issue is the solution for Northern Ireland. As I said earlier, I have heard many solutions for Northern Ireland already. It has been suggested that an economic zone could be created, or that the Single Market and the customs union could continue to be extended to Northern Ireland. All of these solutions are possible. As the European Parliament will express in its next resolution, however, the position paper that the British Government has put on the table is not possible because it says that there should be a return to a border and that it will be made invisible. I have always thought that if a border is not visible, it is no border. If a border is visible, it is a border. It is not only with a number of technical features that the problem can be solved. We are in favour of any solution that avoids in any way a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. That is going to be our goal. As I indicated in my intervention yesterday, the main proposal for avoiding a hard border that I have heard involves Northern Ireland continuing to participate in the Single Market and the customs union.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Mr. Verhofstadt and call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Mr. Verhofstadt for his contribution. I have no doubt about the stupidity and, frankly, obnoxiousness of the Tory position when it comes to the negotiations about Britain's exit from the EU. I am thinking particularly of its anti-immigrant policies. Given that the EU insisted on the cruel punishment of our citizens for the banking collapse, can we take Mr. Verhofstadt seriously when he says that the EU will not allow Ireland to be punished for Britain's decision to leave the EU? For example, the EU insisted on the im-

position of dreadful austerity on our citizens for things that were not their responsibility.

Given that the EU insists on borders of steel, barbed wire and police camps enforced by Frontex in order to keep out tens of thousands of desperate refugees who are fleeing warzones like Syria, can we take Mr. Verhofstadt seriously when he says noble things about the EU not believing in borders and wanting to reduce borders to lines on maps? If the EU is willing to do this to desperate and vulnerable people, some of whom are drowning in the Mediterranean as a result, how can we take seriously Mr. Verhofstadt's pledge to try not to impose borders here? What Britain decides to do is one thing, but I would like to hear an absolute guarantee that the EU will not insist on some sort of border in order to protect its Single Market. If we were to get such a commitment from Mr. Verhofstadt, we could deal with Britain and the problems it is imposing. Can he give us that guarantee? Can we give credibility to his assertions about not believing in borders, given his insistence on imposing them in a very cruel way in other parts of the European Union?

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: Fáilte romhat anseo inniu. I acknowledge the work that has been done by our officials, Departments and various bodies to prepare for the unknown while working in a vacuum. At the founding of the EU its principles were peace, harmony and economic and social development for everybody but those principles are being undermined by the way Europe responded to the migrant crisis and by the economic crash, which showed a widening division between rich and poor. Is this an opportunity for the EU to redefine its vision and to become more committed to the values on which it was set up? There is an issue around development aid and we are seeing an increasing securitisation agenda. There is a fear that this will divert badly-needed funding and there will now be a further shortfall from Britain.

My second question relates to Ireland as we will be particularly affected in many areas because of Brexit and its potential economic consequences. How can Europe support Irish jobs and businesses in that area? A terrible gamble is being taken with the Good Friday Agreement. Flawed as it is, it has ensured peace for a generation of people who have not experienced the violence their parents and grandparents experienced. As well as economic consequences, there are consequences relating to identity and culture.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Cuirim fáilte roimh Mr. Verhofstadt anseo inniu and I thank him for his time. He visited the Border yesterday and I hope all the cows will be as quiet as those he met in Monaghan. He said we needed to sort out and clean up our banking but we left it a bit late in the day for that. We did not get a lot of assistance when we had the crash and we had to sign up to some very stiff penalties.

Mr. Verhofstadt said other countries had recently had votes which were more conciliatory towards the EU, and that is good. I interpreted him as saying there was one last chance to be more democratic, but democracy in Brussels has been lost. I welcome our MEPs here today, but there have been many regulations and restrictions as to what we can and cannot do and that is why Brexit happened. They need to look at that, and comments from some very senior people after Brexit were not very helpful.

Mr. Verhofstadt might elaborate on what he meant by a frictionless border. There is a massive border between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is much bigger than ours with three checkpoints and which was built with EU funding. Mr. Verhofstadt says it will not happen here and that Great Britain will have to look after the Border, but that is not good enough for us. We need concrete and tangible measures. It is difficult but we need to know the bottom line and the impact it will have on the Single Market, among other issues.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the leader of the Green Party, Deputy Eamon Ryan.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am speaking on behalf of the Green Party, which is an all-Ireland party. I am joined by my colleague, Clare Bailey, from the Assembly in the North. We are very close to our English and Scottish colleagues and our colleagues in the European Parliament, Philippe Lamberts and others, with whom we work very closely on the European Green Party position. I am very heartened by what Mr. Verhofstadt said because it marks a change from what Mr. Barnier said when he was here a few months ago, to the effect that a border is a border. He said there would be free movement of people but not of trade or goods, but Mr. Verhofstadt has said the solution has to be one where an effective customs union or the Single Market is upheld. Will that be the red line? Will the Parliament, which has the ultimate veto on any agreement, accept it? We are now into the second phase of the negotiations because the first phase was primarily about people. It seems Mr. Verhofstadt said that he will protect this island in the area of customs, goods and services. He concentrated on four words, which were, “as they may choose”, and in respect of the Good Friday Agreement there are another four key words, “in all its parts”. How will the European Parliament choose when it comes to preserving the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts? Mr. Verhofstadt’s language today could not have given a clearer signal that we were going to preserve an island for the trade in goods and services and not just people. I welcome his clarity on this as it is the right position. Mr. Verhofstadt should be strong on it or the negotiations will take place and, at the very end, the British will say they did not know that was his position. I agree with the position he has set out today.

Mr. Guy Verhofstadt: The bottom line, the red line for the European Parliament, will be no hard border. It is not for us to say it has to be this or that system as that is for the negotiations to provide, but we have to give the green light, or the red light if we do not agree. “No hard border” is not a rhetorical element of our position but a firm position of the European Parliament and we will never accept an outcome of negotiations which does exactly the opposite. There are possibilities to achieve it and in the negotiations we will have to try to find viable solutions. I have indicated a few possibilities in this area.

There was a remark on my commitment to the external borders of the European Union. When there are problems with the external borders of the European Union, they are mainly because of a lack of European Union. They are problems caused by policies of nation states and not by a so-called European policy. There is a lack of European policy on migration, asylum and border management. Excuse me if I use a non-parliamentary term, but it is crazy.

An Ceann Comhairle: I have heard a lot worse.

Mr. Guy Verhofstadt: It is completely crazy to have freedom of movement inside a territory but no common management of the border outside. It is nonsense to do that. In that respect the position of the European Parliament is that we support a European border management carried out in a decent, human way. This is absolutely needed. Do members know the budget of the European Border and Coastguard Agency, which used to be known as Frontex? It is €250 million. Homeland security in the United States is €62 billion. We think we can solve problems at a European level without providing the means and the possibility to do so. People say the Union does not tackle the challenges of today and does not have good results, but to have good results one needs good policies, for which one needs the financial means. In terms of a European asylum system to replace Dublin - excuse me for criticising Dublin but I refer to its place in asylum policy, in the form of the Dublin Regulation - we need ways of having legal migration because this is the only way to tackle illegal migration. We push asylum seekers into the arms of criminal organisations because the only way to ask for asylum is to set foot on European soil.

I remember the first time I attended the European Council as Belgian Prime Minister. It was in 1999 in the north of Finland, in Tampere, where it is always dark. We decided that we should have a common European asylum and migration policy. So many years later, we are still not there. That is the problem of Europe. It is not only a question of announcing things but also of making them really happen.

The third question was on the specificities and interests of Ireland. The strategy we and the EU negotiator are following is that all the interests of Ireland are taken on board in the negotiation mandate of the European Union. That is the way to work on this. That is the way to ensure that those interests are taken on board in the final agreement. It is also the best way to keep the unity of the EU 27 because - let us be very realistic - there are going to be attempts to undermine it, which cannot happen. The only way to prevent it is to fully take on board the interests of Ireland - the Irish Republic - in the negotiation mandate, and that is what we in the European Parliament will try to secure.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Mr. Verhofstadt and call Deputy Durkan.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I compliment Mr. Verhofstadt on his visit to this House, his visit to Northern Ireland and the Border area, and his obviously thorough knowledge of the situation as to how Brexit affects this country. He should also be complimented on his passion and commitment to the European concept, something which has become vague in some quarters and countries and the results of which we have seen. He has the commitment and determination to follow through on what he has said, which is hugely important for this country and for the island of Ireland.

The *status quo* must be maintained. Any diminution of what we have enjoyed for the past 20 years in respect of Northern Ireland or of what we have achieved during our years of membership of the European Union must be prevented. We must improve, grow and develop these conditions as time goes by. We must guard against any movement whatsoever to diminish the role of the European Union in our affairs or our role in European affairs. We must be very careful not to go down that road.

Mr. Verhofstadt has been very constant and consistent in his views since we met him in Brussels on a number of occasions. Does he remain satisfied that the European project will continue for all other EU countries? Will disruptive words such as occur from time to time be curtailed and will all members of the EU be conscious of the need to work together for the Union? Each member state must take ownership. None of us is on the outside looking in. We are all part of Europe and must maintain that position. Can Mr. Verhofstadt be sure that we will be able to maintain that position throughout Europe in the future?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Durkan and call the Member who proposed this special sitting, Deputy Donnelly.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: I thank Mr. Verhofstadt for accepting the invitation to attend and for his steadfast defence of Ireland's and Northern Ireland's interests in the Brexit negotiations. It is very much appreciated. I would like to ask him about the customs union. I met recently with members of the British Government in London. They are resolute that they are leaving the customs union and were pretty clear that they are open to regulatory divergence, including in food, animal welfare and so on. As we all know, they insist both are possible without any borders.

There has been a bovine theme this morning so I will give an example in keeping with it. Brazil produces high-quality, grass-fed beef at just above half the price that British and Irish farmers can afford. If the UK, outside the customs union, were to reach a zero-tariff agreement with Brazil on beef, large containers of high-quality Brazilian beef would land in Belfast. Smugglers would convey that beef into the Republic. Some of those smugglers have links to paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland. Inevitably, the beef would continue on to the rest of Europe. Northern Ireland would thus be used as a back door for cheap, high-quality, tariff-free, illegal beef to come into Europe. Inevitably, the EU would have to respond and, inevitably, we would see a hard border. We would have a nationalist community in Northern Ireland pulled out of Europe against its will, seeing a fence built around it, at the same time as profits from smuggling would start funnelling into paramilitary organisations there. Brazilian cows could contribute to the material destabilisation of the peace process.

I sense some softening of a position in the UK on the customs union. The British are saying they will leave the customs union but might be able to talk about a customs union. What is the European Parliament's position on trying to find the space where people can save face politically but, by changing the word "the" to "a", where the UK can stay in the customs union in all but name, thus avoiding a hard border around the Six Counties?

Deputy David Cullinane: I thank Mr. Verhofstadt for being here and for meeting all parties in Stormont yesterday, as well as communities across the Border. I hope he will report back to the European Commission on these welcome engagements. On behalf of my colleagues who are MPs and MEPs, I ask if he intends to produce a formal report not just for the Commission but also for the steering group of the European Parliament that is dealing with Brexit.

Mr. Verhofstadt said he accepts Ireland's unique circumstances. That is something we saw in the European Commission's paper as well and I welcome it. We want to hear what, in the final analysis, the term "unique" will mean for Ireland. I welcome that Mr. Verhofstadt says that the North of Ireland must remain in the customs union. As we know, the British Government is against this. That needs to be a very clear, firm view not just of the European Parliament but also of the Commission. It has to be an absolute red line issue. If the North is taken out of the European Union against its will and if it is also taken out of the customs union and Single Market against its will, there will be an EU frontier on the island of Ireland. There will be a border. We do not want a hard border, a soft border or any type of border. It has to be a very clear, firm position of the European Commission that the North should remain in the customs union.

We also want it set as a protocol that the Good Friday Agreement, as was said, be attached to the withdrawal agreement. That gives full legal protections to the agreement. We cannot cherry-pick the Good Friday Agreement. It must be protected in its entirety. Citizens in the North have to have access to the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights.

In respect of reforming the European Union, democracy is the key issue. Reform means different things to different people. My view of reform of the European Union might be different from that of Mr. Verhofstadt. If we are to learn anything from Brexit, it is that we need more democracy in Europe. I hope that will be at the heart of any debate on the future of Europe.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Craughwell. Sorry - Senator Craughwell.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I have no intention of ever entering this House other than to attend meetings such as this.

Co-Chairman Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Never say never.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I will press on. I thank Mr. Verhofstadt for attending. I am delighted to hear him talk about the new-found solidarity of a post-Brexit EU in which Irish citizens will not have to pick up the cost of reckless banking across Europe in the future. I will move on from that matter, however.

There is a notion that the UK is responsible for the Border and that it is, therefore, its problem. Let us be totally honest; it is not. As the Deputy across the Chamber just pointed out with his Brazilian beef example, the problem is Europe's and not the UK's. The British will have no interest whatsoever in putting a border in place. Their sole concern is migration. They can control migration on the boats and aircraft travelling from Northern Ireland. One has to have one's passport to get a flight to Britain as matters stand. How do we protect the Single Market when confronted with a Britain that could not care less about a border in Northern Ireland? How do we defend the rights of some 1.5 million Irish citizens or potential Irish citizens who are, by reason of geography, living on the wrong part of this island? How do we guarantee them access to such programmes as Erasmus+? How do we guarantee them free travel throughout the European Union? How do we guarantee them access to all the benefits that are bestowed on every citizen of Europe? A citizen of Ireland is by default a citizen of Europe. How do we guarantee these things? Finally, how do we bring the European Union closer to the citizen on the ground? Citizens in this country have taken one hell of a beating over the past eight to ten years with austerity.

Mr. Guy Verhofstadt: Again, I will respond to three or four of the points that have been made. With the Ceann Comhairle's permission, I will start with the last point on citizenship because we have talked a lot about borders and economic interests but perhaps not enough about citizenship. The position of the Parliament, which will be reiterated in the new resolution, is that we need to protect fully the EU citizenship that several hundred thousand Northern Irish citizens who hold Irish passports have. We must take this seriously. It concerns all the elements linked to EU citizenship. EU citizenship is not something from which one can pick and choose - consular aid, yes, but voting rights, no. It is a concept that is linked to EU citizenship and the position of the European Parliament is that we must protect it. In the Brexit steering group, one of the priorities is to look into this and be sure that we on the European side defend this concept during the negotiations. It cannot be the case that we say these people are EU citizens but that EU citizenship does not mean anything. That is not possible. It must mean what it is: all the rights that are in fact linked to that concept.

With the Ceann Comhairle's permission, I will respond to another question that has been put forward: what is happening now in this discussion about citizens' rights in general? This also concerns Irish citizens living in Britain. Our concept, our proposal, from the European side and the European Parliament side is that we simply continue collectively the rights that the more than 3 million EU citizens living in the UK have currently. We are very critical - and we will reiterate this in the next resolution - of the UK side's proposal to introduce a new concept of settled status in British immigration legislation that will require each one of these millions of citizens to make an individual request to continue to have his or her rights. Individual means individual, so if there are four family members, four requests need to be initiated. There will be a number of conditions and a need to prove a number of things. This will create an enormous administrative burden on these millions of European citizens, including many Irish citizens in Britain. The same goes for UK citizens living on the Continent but I do not think this is such a big problem because all the remaining EU member states recognise that the best way forward

is simply to continue the rights those citizens have now. I am saying this because this is a key issue that must be solved, it is to be hoped as quickly as possible, to end the uncertainty for these millions of people who are today already subject to a number of practices by which they are losing a number of their rights. This is not to mention that some of them received a letter - apparently it was a mistake - stating they had simply to leave the country as quickly as possible. This is completely against the EU treaties because, until withdrawal, the UK continues to be a member of the European Union, needs to apply fully EU law and does not have the right to send such letters.

A question was asked about the customs union and the example of beef was given. Other examples are possible. The problem for the European Union is not that the British side may say tomorrow they want to continue in the customs union. Nobody in the European Union will say that is not possible. However, to be in the customs union also means that the competence to make trade agreements continues to be exercised by the European Union. That is the consequence of a customs union. In a customs union a country does not negotiate tariffs and trade agreements individually; it is the European Union that does that based on the treaties. One cannot say one wants to be in the customs union but will manage trade oneself. That is not the European Union. I think everyone will accept, certainly now that it has already been proposed by some in Britain, that the UK should stay for a transitional period in the customs union, but it cannot pick and choose and say it wants to be in this but not that. One cannot say, "I want to be in the customs union and the Single Market but I do not want to pay, I do not want the oversight of the European Court of Justice, I do not want migrants coming from eastern Europe and I do not want it to be the European Union that negotiates trade deals in the future." That is not possible. Membership comes with positive things but also with obligations. One cannot create a system in which not being a member of the European Union is more favourable than being a member. One would then destroy the European project. I am very open to and positive about what Deputy Donnelly said in his question but, as I said, it is not a question of taking the benefits and putting the burden on the remaining 27 member states. That will not happen and will not be allowed to happen. That is not objective, not serious and certainly not the kind of European Union we all want.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have nine further questioners. We are up against our time limit now but I propose extending the session a little. I will take the nine questioners provided they take no more than one minute each. Perhaps we will take all nine and then come back to Mr. Verhofstadt. It will be a somewhat gargantuan task to respond to all the questions but we will proceed nonetheless. I will call the Members in the order in which they have indicated. I call Deputy Seán Haughey.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I welcome Mr. Verhofstadt to the Dáil Chamber and thank him for his very constructive engagement. He may recall that he met the European affairs committee in Brussels last February. At that time there was much uncertainty about the place, but I think we appreciated then and we appreciate now the sympathy and understanding he has shown for Ireland's position. As he knows, Ireland has major concerns regarding the Good Friday Agreement, the common travel area and the possible implementation of a hard border.

Because I only have one minute, I will go straight to my questions. Regarding the Brexit negotiations, does Mr. Verhofstadt think it will be very important for the British Prime Minister to give some significant indication tomorrow of the UK's position on the EU budget contribution into the future? I think Mr. Verhofstadt said solutions to the Irish question are solely a matter for the UK. Does he not think the Commission and the Parliament could also have some draft

proposals on solving our particular problem? Regarding the future of Europe, the Commission has put forward five scenarios. I think the President of the Commission put forward a sixth scenario in all but name during the week. Ireland has concerns about proposals for corporate tax harmonisation and a deepening common defence policy. We are losing a friend as we lose the UK from the European Union. Can Mr. Verhofstadt assure us, now that the Franco-German axis is fully restored, that the interests of small nation states will not be forgotten about as we plan the future of Europe?

Senator Terry Leyden: A Cheann Comhairle, a Chathaoirligh, Minister, Ministers of State, MPs, MLAs and MEPs, it is nice to be back in the Chamber after 25 years or so. Things have changed quite dramatically in the meantime. Céad míle fáilte to Mr. Verhofstadt, the European Parliament's Brexit co-ordinator. I was impressed by his visit to Belfast and the Border areas, including Monaghan, to see the invisible Border between the North and South. He described it very well.

Post-Brexit, we will need more support from the European Parliament and the European Commission to strengthen our regional airports and ports. I will refer in particular to Ireland West Airport Knock, which needs a derogation and additional Government support, which are matters for the Commission. I would like Mr. Verhofstadt to bring that point back to the Commission.

Mr. Verhofstadt's points about a customs union, or a single market, between North and South were good. A single market is essential.

I appeal for the power-sharing Executive to be re-established in Northern Ireland. Why would someone allow Brexit MEPs to be Ministers in Northern Ireland? It is unthinkable.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Mr. Verhofstadt is welcome. If history has taught people in Ireland anything over the centuries, it is that Ireland disproportionately suffers from belligerent British foreign policy. I welcomed Mr. Verhofstadt's statement that Ireland must not pay the price for Brexit. Those were fine and well-meaning words, but we need practical measures to ensure that it does not happen.

There has been much discussion of the Border and the Good Friday Agreement, and rightly so, but I do not want Europe, Mr. Verhofstadt, his team or the European Parliament to lose sight of the fact that there is €60 billion worth of trade between Ireland and Britain every year, underpinning hundreds of thousands of jobs. The Border is crucial, as are business and people's livelihoods. What are the practical measures? Our party has proposed a European reform fund to support exposed areas and sectors at a European level. Our agrifood industry has lost nearly €800 million from the value of its exports, but it is just one of many.

Mr. Verhofstadt understands the situation and I welcome his visit today as well as his visit to the Border, but let us not lose sight of the hundreds of thousands of jobs in Ireland underpinned by, and dependent on, the €60 billion in trade with our nearest neighbour.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Go raibh maith a Cheann Comhairle, agus a Chathaoirligh fostar dar ndóigh. Cuirim fáilte roimh an tUasal Verhofstadt. He and I met yesterday in my home city of Belfast. In this Oireachtas, I am a member of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. Those of us in the North who are Irish do not derive our Irishness from the Good Friday Agreement. It, of course, runs much deeper than that. When the agreement was lodged with the EU and the UN, however, it affirmed our legal rights

in the eyes of the world as Irish and, therefore, EU citizens. It says that on the front of our passports to remind us.

Mr. Verhofstadt has referenced comprehensively something that we discussed yesterday, namely, the importance of the psychology of citizenship and our place within the world. While our Irish citizenship in the North should never be partial, conditional or second class, nor should our EU citizenship. Mr. Verhofstadt was clear in his remarks regarding a future for EU citizens living in the North, but perhaps he might expand on what that will mean for the EU citizen who is a farmer in Fermanagh, a worker in Strabane or an entrepreneur in Newry. If such people are to access their rights and entitlements as full EU citizens, what will that look like?

Senator Frank Feighan: I welcome Mr. Verhofstadt. Those of us on the island of Ireland see that, once again, the British have shot themselves in our foot. We feel bad about that.

I am Vice Chairman of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. Most of the parliamentarians from Scotland, Ireland, England, Wales and other jurisdictions are concerned about this situation and would like to see a change. Mr. Verhofstadt answered Deputy Donnelly regarding the lengthy transition period. I view the statement made by Mr. Jeremy Corbyn as indicating a change in the political climate in the UK, which could lead to a second referendum. We would welcome that, but will Mr. Verhofstadt share his opinion on the matter?

I welcome Mr. Verhofstadt's views on safeguarding the Good Friday Agreement. The EU has been a significant stakeholder in the Agreement, if not the most significant, and has underpinned it.

Turning to a concern for the island of Ireland, would it be possible to have a final deal without Ireland's agreement?

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I welcome Mr. Verhofstadt and the commitment to support the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts, but one part has been neglected slightly, that being, the commitment to human rights equivalence. I am not referring to citizens' rights, which have been discussed at length. Human rights equivalence is a pillar of the agreement. I would appreciate Mr. Verhofstadt's thoughts on how it can be enforced as a key aspect in the negotiations and kept from being lost.

In terms of peace building and the Good Friday Agreement, it is important for Europe to understand Ireland's role and global contribution as a neutral nation.

My specific question is on the second stage of negotiations. Mr. Verhofstadt has been clear, in that the European Parliament will have a say over whether we enter those negotiations. A new trade negotiating mandate will need to be given by the Council to the Commission. In his role in the European Parliament, will Mr. Verhofstadt seek for environmental, equality and employment standards to be central in any negotiating mandate so as to ensure that there is no race to the bottom, which would damage Ireland deeply? Given that Mr. Verhofstadt's country of Belgium has referred investor courts to the European Court of Justice to test their compatibility with European law, can we expect that any trade negotiating mandate given to the Commission by the Council and supported by the Council will not include such mechanisms?

Senator Paul Coghlan: Mr. Verhofstadt's words were heartening to us all, particularly his assurance on behalf of the European Parliament regarding the protection of the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts. Presumably, that includes the European Parliament's British Members as well.

Does Mr. Verhofstadt agree that the problem with the state of the negotiations arises from the divisions within the British Cabinet? Until Mr. Johnson, who Mr. Verhofstadt mentioned, is removed, banished or whatever and the British Cabinet reaches a single position, progress will be slow. Perhaps a little time has to be allowed for that. Does Mr. Verhofstadt agree that, as negotiations proceed, the British Cabinet will have to become more realistic? If, like all of us, it wants to ensure the continuation of the invisible Border, it will have to be.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I thank Mr. Verhofstadt for his address and for his visit to Monaghan and the other Border counties yesterday. Much of what has been said today concerns what scenario we are to face, in that, it is in the future and the negotiation must conclude - if it is to conclude - successfully. However, the reality for many people in this State is that the decision of the British people to leave the EU has been having a dramatic economic impact for some considerable time already.

In solidarity with hard-pressed sectors of our economy, will the EU respond with assistance and supports for struggling Irish enterprises? As has been mentioned, these enterprises are found especially in the agrifood industry. Mr. Verhofstadt may have met some of them yesterday. Coming from County Monaghan, where Mr. Verhofstadt was yesterday, and representing Cavan and Monaghan as I do in this Chamber, I am conscious of the reality of daily life for many people. There is a sizable fear that, whatever is decided, sectors will be significantly reduced and jobs lost without solid economic supports.

An Ceann Comhairle: Our final question will come from the kingdom of Kerry and Deputy John Brassil.

Deputy John Brassil: I welcome Mr. Verhofstadt and thank him for his contribution. I noted with interest his comment that the EU would never allow Ireland to suffer from the UK's decision to leave Europe. We greatly welcome that. We are presuming Mr. Verhofstadt speaks on behalf of the EU negotiating team and that is what we are pinning our hopes on. However, he stated that the solution in respect of Brexit has to come from the UK. Unfortunately, those two positions are not compatible and they have not been compatible for the past 15 months. There is nothing the UK Government has done that gives any bit of solace to us that the solution will come from the UK. Along with all of my colleagues, I believe that if Mr. Verhofstadt can take one message from his visit here today, it is that we are depending on the EU to ensure that Ireland, as the country most exposed to this decision, does not suffer. If we are depending on the UK to come up with a solution, as Mr. Verhofstadt said, that simply will not happen. We have to proceed on the basis that it is the EU's responsibility to protect us, and that is what we need it to do.

Mr. Guy Verhofstadt: On the questions on external security, as I have already indicated in the first resolution, we in the European Parliament think that for the future relationship, the best way is to use an association agreement, as was seen in the Lisbon treaty. That gives the possibility not only to talk about trade but also to talk about the other issues we have to tackle in the future and the other parts of that relationship. It can be on culture, on education or on research, and it can be on internal and external security matters. I think it is in the interests of everybody, including the Union, that we do that. Therefore, it will not only be about trade and economics; it will be a broader decision, in that sense. I underline what has been said, namely, that the British side has proposed a number of ideas.

Second, many speakers said that it is all very well what I am saying but asked how, in practice and on practical matters, it will work. I can tell them that, yesterday, I spoke with many

representatives of sectors, specifically about the practical consequences of Brexit and how to deal with these. I did not only talk about borders and avoiding a hard border. We spoke a lot about the general position of the Irish economy and of the Republic of Ireland, and the threats because of Brexit, because it is a main trading partner of Britain. We spoke of how to secure this trading position and also the trading position of Ireland towards the rest of the European Union because the normal streams of goods towards the European continent are under threat if we have no good solutions in these Brexit negotiations. I spoke about very concrete solutions for that with the different representatives of the sectors in order to understand their fears, their problems and how they see they could be solved in the future. I have taken on board a number of very practical suggestions on how that could be done within an agreement with the UK while defending the economic and trade position of Ireland after the withdrawal.

I have noted also the suggestion that has been made by some speakers to put the Good Friday Agreement as an annex of the withdrawal agreement. It is also a suggestion that has been made in the European Parliament and we are discussing that at the moment in the Brexit steering group.

On the divisions and the development of opinions in Britain, it is true that these are not for the moment helping the negotiations move forward. However, let us hope that these divisions of opinion will be overcome in the coming days and weeks in order that this fourth negotiation round can be a step forward towards the future.

Another element, having noted the negative impact of Brexit, is whether the Union will take its responsibility. Naturally, the Union will take its responsibility. We have the instruments for that and the funds for that, and it will certainly be done. However, let us first negotiate a good withdrawal agreement and a good association agreement on future relationships to minimise the impact, and then see what will be the nature of that impact.

On a last point, when I said in my introduction that it is for the UK to take responsibility and to come forward, this is not for lack of ideas because I have given ideas in my introduction and Deputy Micheál Martin has made a proposal here about an economic zone. I have spoken about what some have said to me, which is that the best way to solve it is to extend the Single Market and the customs union to Northern Ireland. All this is on the table. However, the reason I am saying this is that it is true that the decision to go out of the European Union has not been taken by Ireland, by the Irish Government or by the European Union. It is a consequence of a British decision so there is also, in that sense, a responsibility on their side to come forward with proposals that can work - not proposals which create a hard border, but proposals which avoid that. That is the reason I am recalling that all the time. There is, on their side, responsibility to accept a solution that is workable and, at the same time, that avoids a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

We have to see it a little bit as an element of the negotiation. It is not that they have taken a decision to go out and, so, we have all the problems on our back and have to find solutions for all the problems. No. There is a responsibility also on their side. For example, financially, one cannot go out of the European Union and say that the whole financial burden is for the remaining 27. Commitments made by 28 member states cannot later on be paid by the remaining 27. In one or another way, it is like a divorce. I have to tell the House I have no practical experience of divorces personally but I know that, in a divorce, you cannot go out and leave your partner alone in the house and say, "Now, all the financial things are for you. Bye-bye." That is not the way it works. Commitments have been made and if commitments have been made, then it is also normal that payments will be required based on these commitments.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you very much. I call on the Cathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann to make his concluding remarks.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Mr. Verhofstadt for attending and for engaging with the members of the joint committees. Today's meeting has provided another opportunity to highlight Ireland's priorities in the Brexit negotiations and the need for flexible and imaginative solutions in regard to the special position of Ireland. The guiding principles published on 7 September by the EU in regard to the talks on Ireland and Northern Ireland are positive and encouraging. It is clear that the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland, particularly in the context of the Good Friday Agreement and the common travel area, are fully recognised. This meeting also provided an opportunity to underline the importance for Ireland of its continued membership of the EU and its commitment to Europe. Given his role in framing and presenting the final UK exit package to the European Parliament, we look forward to continued engagement with Mr. Verhofstadt as the negotiations continue. We wish him and the European Parliament steering group well in the work ahead. Go raibh míle maith agat.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you very much, a Chathaoirligh.

The special meeting of the joint committees adjourned at 12.20 p.m *sine die*.