
Statement by the Taoiseach on the October European Council, Brussels, 19 – 20 October 2017

A Cheann Comhairle,
Tá áthas orm seasamh os comhair an Tí inniu le labhairt faoin gComhairle Eorpach Dheireadh Fomhair, a bhí ar siúl sa Bhruiséal Déardaoin agus Dé hAoine seo caite.
Déardaoin, phlé an Comhairle Eorpach an imirce, an Eoraip Dhigiteach, cúrsaí slándála agus cosanta, agus an caidreamh seachtrach.

Dé hAoine, ag bricfeasta, phléamar todhchaí an Aontais Eorpaigh. Bhuaileamar i bhfoirm Alt – gan an Bhreatain - le dul chun cinn sna cainteanna maidir le Brexit a phlé.

Nordic/Baltic meeting

In advance of the meeting, I was invited, along with the Dutch Prime Minister, to join the leaders of the Nordic and Baltic countries, who meet regularly ahead of European Councils.

Ireland is not part of a formal group in the EU, but as a small northern European nation with an open economy, we have similar positions on many issues, particularly economic issues. So I was very pleased to attend the meeting and to have the opportunity to share our views, including on the future of Europe debate.

Exchange of Views with European Parliament / Other Issues

The meeting began on Thursday with an exchange with President Tajani of the European Parliament. There was also a short discussion about natural disasters: I took the opportunity of this to inform leaders about storm Ophelia, and suggested that flexibility in the EU Solidarity Fund might be a way to bring Europe closer to its citizens. I also thanked President Macron and Prime Minister May for the help we received from French and Scottish electricity teams.

Migration

Migration was the issue for the first working session. On this, there has been a fall in the number of migrants coming from Africa and the Middle East and, crucially, there has been a welcome decrease in the number of lives lost at sea.

I drew attention to the distressing human rights reports from Médecins sans Frontières in relation to the reception facilities in Libya. I also raised the question of support for Africa more generally, and what more needs to be done to remove the root causes of migration.

I confirmed that Ireland would double its commitment to the EU Trust Fund for Africa over the next few years, taking it from €3 million to €6 million. France and Poland also made pledges to the Trust Fund.

Digital Europe

As I signalled here last week, the issue of Digital Europe was one of the most important agenda items from our perspective, and the language we agreed for the European Council Conclusions had been substantially proposed by Ireland and a group of like-minded countries. These include a high level of ambition for completing the Digital Single Market, including through the free flow of data, and agreeing a future-oriented regulatory framework.

There is a challenging time-line for agreeing proposals across this area but we have to be ambitious if we are to deliver practical benefits for our citizens and businesses, and ensure our global competitiveness.

There was a good exchange around the issue of taxation of digital companies. I emphasised that in a globalised world, a solution on tax must be global in nature. This is reflected in the Conclusions we adopted. If there is not a level playing field internationally, and if Europe were to act unilaterally, we could end up handing an advantage to other economies.

As Ireland has said on numerous previous occasions, the OECD is the best forum for dealing with this: that is why I asked for a reference to the OECD work in the Conclusions ahead of any mention of the EU Commission.

The Commission has also been invited to present proposals early next year but these will require discussion and, as a taxation issue, will be subject to unanimity. A number of countries were very firm on that point.

Security and Defence

A Cheann Comhairle,
As I flagged in June and again last week, given the challenges we face, there is an increasing focus within the EU on security and defence issues.

Most of our partners want to press ahead with Permanent Structured Cooperation, which is known as PESCO, and is provided for in the Treaties. It aims to provide a mechanism whereby military crisis management capabilities can be developed by Member States in support of Common Security and Defence Policy Operations (CSDP Operations).

Discussions around PESCO are ongoing, with some aspects - in relation to governance, capabilities and projects – still to be settled. The ambition is to be ready to launch it in December. Ireland has been taking a realistic and constructive approach to the discussions, and we hope that we will be able to participate.

We have a longstanding policy of military neutrality and of not joining military alliances. We also have constitutional guarantees which are reflected in the protocols to the Lisbon Treaty. We will not of course do anything which compromises these positions. However, we are not a neutral country when it comes to issues like human trafficking, or terrorism, or cyber crime, or drugs trafficking. We are very much in favour of cooperating with EU partners on a range of security issues, and we will approach PESCO and the other issues on the agenda in that spirit. The European Council agreed to have a fuller discussion and a progress assessment of PESCO and other security and defence issues in December.

External Relations

We had lengthy discussions on a number of external relations items – including Turkey and Iran - on Thursday evening. Minister McEntee will speak about these in her wrap-up remarks.

The evening session also included a presentation by Prime Minister May, in which she made a number of positive points regarding the Brexit negotiations, including:

- EU citizen's rights;
- the absolute necessity to protect the Good Friday Agreement;
- her wish to avoid any physical border on the island of Ireland;
- her commitment that no Member State will lose out or have to pay more into the current budget as a result of the UK leaving; and
- the UK's intention to remain a strong security partner.

Of course, further detail is required on all these points but the presentation was welcome nonetheless and positively received.

While trade matters were not discussed in detail at this meeting, the EU negotiations with Mercosur, as well as requests for Council mandates to open negotiations with Australia and New Zealand, are likely to feature in future Council discussions.

The Future of Europe

President Tusk chaired a useful exchange on Friday morning on the Future of Europe, based on his 'Leader's Agenda.' I thanked him personally for taking the time to speak with each of the 28 leaders individually in advance of the European Council. The general consensus at the breakfast meeting was that President Tusk's proposed process is the right one. The debate should not be led by any one country, or group of countries, but should be done by the community method. His plan envisages additional meetings at the level of Heads of State or Government: while this is a significant commitment, it should provide the impetus necessary for decision-making.

As an issue, the Future of Europe is at least as important for Ireland as Brexit is, because we are staying in the EU, and we want to make sure that it continues to work for our citizens.

I have asked Minister McEntee to take the lead role on this and to begin an engagement programme which will interact with our citizens and set out what we want the future of Europe to look like.

European Council (Art. 50)

After the discussions on the future of Europe, the European Council met in its Article 50 format to discuss progress in the Brexit negotiations.

Michel Barnier reported on the recent rounds of negotiations on the withdrawal issues – EU citizens' rights; UK financial commitments; and Irish / Northern Irish-specific issues - and as expected, he advised that there has not yet been sufficient progress to move onto phase two of the negotiations, on the future relationship. In light of the good progress that has been achieved however, we agreed that Mr. Barnier and the Council should start internal preparations among the EU 27 for the next phase.

It is worth recalling that, for there to be sufficient progress, we do not have to see the three issues fully resolved, rather we need to have achieved the degree of progress necessary for the 27 to consider that a move to the second phase is warranted. As Deputies are aware, Ireland has worked very closely with Michel Barnier and the Commission Task Force, and we will continue to do so in this context.

Ireland's overall priorities are clear: protect the peace process; no new barriers to trade or movement of people on our island; maintaining the Common Travel Area and all that flows from it; an effective transitional arrangement leading to the closest possible relationship between the EU and the UK; and working for the future of the EU with Ireland at its heart.

Prime Minister May's comments to the European Council, particularly in respect of rejecting any physical infrastructure along NI/Ireland border were welcome. However, more clarity is needed across all three exit issues and I urge the UK to now provide more detail on how their stated commitments in relation to the withdrawal issues will be given meaningful effect, so that sufficient progress can be made as soon as possible, and ultimately agreement can be reached.

Thank you.