
Statement by An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, TD, on the European Council, Brussels, 14-15 December 2017 Dáil Éireann, 13 December 2017

A Cheann Comhairle,

I am pleased to speak to the Dáil today ahead of the European Council, which takes place in Brussels tomorrow and Friday.

The European Council will meet in four separate formats over the course of the two days.

The main meeting on Thursday will focus on social, educational and cultural cooperation, as well as security and defence.

Tomorrow evening, we will meet under the Leaders' Agenda, as part of the debate on the future of Europe, to discuss migration.

On Friday morning, a Euro Summit will consider the Economic and Monetary Union.

We will then meet in Article 50 format - without the UK - to discuss progress in the Brexit negotiations.

I will speak first about the Thursday afternoon meeting of the European Council, which will consider and adopt Conclusions on Social, Education and Cultural matters. Minister McEntee will say more about this in her wrap-up remarks, but I would like to note that this item follows on from discussions which took place in Gothenburg in November. I participated actively in those meetings, and I support the general outcome of the exchanges.

Under the item on security and defence, we will welcome the launch of Permanent Structured Cooperation, or PESCO, and also have a discussion with the Secretary General of NATO on cooperation between the EU and that organisation.

PESCO provides a mechanism whereby military crisis management capabilities can be developed by Member States in support of Common Security and Defence Policy Operations. Ireland took full part in the discussions on setting up PESCO, and we have supported its establishment and, as Deputies are aware, the Dáil debated and voted last week in favour of Ireland's participation.

I want to assure everyone that our core, long-standing policy of military neutrality remains in place. We do not participate in formal military alliances. However, as I have said before, this does not mean that we are neutral about everything. Common threats such as terrorism, cyber-attacks, or drugs trafficking concern all Europeans and it makes perfect sense to work together to respond to them. Our participation in PESCO will facilitate greater cooperation here.

I would also recall our proud history of UN Peacekeeping Operations and EU Common Security and Defence Policy Operations. Participation in specific PESCO projects is on a voluntary basis; and we will therefore participate in a way which complements what we do in those operations.

On migration, we will examine how best to achieve an effective and sustainable policy, which respects the concepts of responsibility and solidarity, while also looking at the root causes and preventing mass arrivals. This is intended to be an open and free-flowing exchange of views, with the aim of unlocking some of the more contentious aspects of the issue.

There will therefore be no formal conclusions. Minister McEntee will provide more detail on this item in her wrap-up remarks.

On Friday morning, the Euro Summit will meet in expanded format of 27 with presentations from ECB President Draghi and the outgoing Eurogroup President. The focus will be mainly on deepening the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and on Banking Union.

As a founder member of the Euro, Ireland supports taking the necessary steps to safeguard our single currency for the future. This means completing the banking union, in particular, through protecting citizens' deposits on a pan-European basis.

We also believe that a genuine Capital Markets Union would provide a useful, extra level to the European economy.

In general terms, we believe that we need to concentrate on completing what has already been agreed. The European Commission published an ambitious set of proposals on 6 December. We will examine these carefully and reflect on their implications.

Finally, we will meet in Article 50 format to discuss progress in the Brexit negotiations.

As Deputies are well aware, this will be a pivotal meeting where we will decide whether there has been sufficient progress on the three phase one issues - the UK financial commitment, and EU citizens' rights, as well as the Irish-specific issues - to allow us to move onto phase two.

There we will consider the shape of the future relationship between the EU and the UK, and possible transitional arrangements.

After long and intensive negotiations over the past weeks, the EU achieved a positive and strong agreement on the Irish-specific issues; and I am satisfied that sufficient progress has now been made on these.

Under the agreement, the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts is protected.

Everyone born in Northern Ireland will continue to have the right to Irish and therefore EU citizenship.

The Common Travel Area will continue, allowing us to travel freely between Britain and Ireland.

British and Irish citizens will continue to have the freedom to live, work and study, and to access housing, healthcare, pensions and welfare in each other's countries as though we are citizens of both.

The United Kingdom has committed to avoiding a hard border as an 'over-arching requirement' with which 'any future arrangements must be compatible'. There will be no physical infrastructure or related checks or controls.

As I have stated before, our preferred option for achieving this is a deep and comprehensive agreement between the EU and the UK, which will allow us to continue trading as we do now.

However, if that is not possible, there is a backstop arrangement in which Northern Ireland - and perhaps all of the UK - will maintain full alignment with the rules of the Internal Market and Customs Union which are relevant to the avoidance of a border, north-south co-operation and the all-island economy.

It is important to stress that this agreement will be held in all circumstances, unless and until all other possible options for the future relationship between the EU and the UK have been agreed.

The UK has also made clear that it intends to ensure that Northern Ireland business will continue to have unfettered access to the whole of the UK, and that no new barriers will develop between Northern Ireland and Great Britain unless the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly agree to it.

EU funding, PEACE and INTERREG, will continue until 2020, and we will favourably examine continuing it beyond that.

The UK has committed to ensuring that, in Northern Ireland, there is no diminution of human rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity set out in European Law.

And, just as important, there will continue to be a distinct strand on Ireland in phase two of these negotiations.

We have to bear in mind the concerns of the unionist community in Northern Ireland and reassure them that the Irish Government has no hidden agenda. I have been very clear throughout these discussions that we are not seeking to use Brexit as a move to a united Ireland without consent. Brexit undoubtedly presents challenges but, notwithstanding those challenges, we want reconciliation and respect to grow.

We have also been clear that we also have no desire to see a border in the Irish Sea. Our strong preference remains to allow travel and free trade across these islands to continue as it does now, and has done for the past 20 years.

Our only ambition has been to ensure that the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement continue to operate in full after Brexit, and that people can go about their normal lives and business as before.

The agreement we have reached explicitly recognises the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement with regard to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and the principle of consent.

At the same time, we have protected the interests of nationalists in Northern Ireland throughout these negotiations. Their birthright as Irish citizens, and therefore as EU citizens, is and will be protected. There will be no hard border on our island.

These rights will, of course, be available to everyone in Northern Ireland who chooses to exercise their right to be an Irish citizen, regardless of their political persuasion or religious beliefs.

With this agreement in place, it is now even more important that the Northern Ireland Executive and the North South Ministerial Council get up and running again. The institutions are vital to moving forward together into phase two of the Brexit talks.

The agreement reached last week between the EU and the UK is very significant for everyone on the island of Ireland, for our neighbouring island, and for all of our fellow members of the European Union.

The Government has been united and firm in its resolve. And I would like to thank the opposition leaders and their parties for the strong and very practical support they have provided.

We all owe a huge debt of gratitude to the EU negotiators, led by Michel Barnier, and to President Juncker, President Tusk, President Tajani and other representatives of the EU institutions, and of course to all the other Member

States.

Their support and solidarity has been invaluable. It is the best of the values of the European Union and why small countries are better off in the EU.

It puts beyond any doubt that our future lies in the European Union at the heart of the common European home that we have helped to build.

I acknowledge too the good will shown by Prime Minister May, and her careful consideration of our concerns.

Ireland has always respected the British people's democratic decision to leave the European Union. We want to assure them of the continued friendship and goodwill of the Irish Government and the Irish people in the months and years ahead.

A Cheann Comhairle,

The European Council provides the framework for resolving the shared challenges at EU level and I look forward to engaging with my colleagues, while always keeping in mind the best interests of this country and of Europe.

I will report back to the House in due course on the outcome of the European Council.

Thank you.