
Speech by the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, T.D., at the Third Plenary Session of the All-Island Civic Dialogue on Brexit

Chairperson, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am delighted to welcome you all to the Third Plenary Session of the All-Island Civic Dialogue on Brexit. Since the first plenary meeting held in this hall last November, the Civic Dialogue process has brought together over 1,500 industry and civic society representatives from right across the island. My colleagues and I have heard from you about the unprecedented challenges which Brexit poses for us all.

These challenges are reflected in the nineteen All-Island Sectoral Dialogues on Brexit which Ministers have hosted since December and in my decision to appoint Simon Coveney as Minister for Foreign Affairs with special responsibility for Brexit.

Minister Coveney has responsibility for coordinating our whole-of-Government response, as well as interacting with the Barnier team. In this work he is ably supported by Minister Helen McEntee, as Minister for European Affairs, who has a specific focus on The Future of Europe debate.

The Government is working tirelessly to ensure that the particular challenges we face are fully understood, right across the European Union.

Since taking office as Taoiseach I have already met with many key figures to reinforce our concerns and explain our policy and interests.

Later today, I will travel to Tallinn for the Digital Summit which will be attended by most of the other EU Prime Ministers. While Brexit is not on the summit agenda, I will once again use the opportunity to raise our concerns in my conversations with them.

In addition, Minister Coveney, Minister McEntee and indeed other Ministers continue to press Irish concerns in all engagements with their counterparts.

In my contacts with European partners, I have received considerable support and understanding for the unique challenges that Brexit could present us.

As of today, it is not yet possible to say whether the European Council will be able to decide that sufficient progress has been made on the issues in the first phase of the negotiations - Irish issues; citizens' rights and the financial settlement - to allow us to move to the second phase in which the framework for a future relationship with the EU will be discussed.

While Prime Minister May's speech last week in Florence was welcome, it does not yet bring us to where we need to be. We need to get into the detail if we are to be able to agree that real progress is being made.

Because we cannot be certain how the process will advance, the Irish Government – Ministers, Departments and agencies – have worked hard to plan for all contingencies. We have taken steps to support our enterprises, to mitigate immediate impacts, and to help them diversify into new markets. We have supported those in the agricultural community who have had to work with considerable uncertainty and currency fluctuation.

Through our sustained efforts at political, diplomatic and official level, we have ensured that the unique issues relating to this island are front and centre of the negotiations in Brussels, negotiations which are ongoing as we speak.

I strongly welcome the Commission Taskforce's recent paper on the Guiding Principles on which solutions for this island will have to be based, namely the protection of the Good Friday Agreement, the maintenance of the Common Travel Area and the avoidance of any new barrier to trade on the island.

Government has been unequivocal in its position that there can be no re-introduction of a border on this island. Anxiety about the border issue extends far beyond the impact on trade and balance sheets, important though that is.

It is also about the emotional impact on communities, North and South, which have become increasingly intertwined over the past two decades.

It is about the day-to-day reality of the cross-border worker or student who travels from Donegal to Derry on a daily basis.

There is, understandably, heightened concern among communities who are worried about how their rights will be protected, including rights arising from citizens in Northern Ireland retaining EU citizenship after Brexit.

And, above all, there is concern that reintroduction of a border will be a step backwards, a step in the wrong direction in terms of the security, peace and political stability.

That is why this afternoon's sessions on how both enterprise and communities can prepare for Brexit are so important.

The timetable for the negotiations envisages the leaders of the 27 remaining Member States – including Ireland – deciding next month whether sufficient progress has been made on the three key phase one issues – citizens' rights, the

financial statement and issues relating to Ireland.

Right now, that timetable looks very challenging. While we have seen some progress, significant gaps remain and time is fast running out. So, the Government has been increasingly vocal in recent weeks in calling on the UK Government to come forward with workable solutions on issues, so that the negotiations can move to the next phase.

As co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, Government will continue to do all it can to protect and support the hard-won peace on this island. It is almost nine months since the collapse of the institutions.

The need to achieve a solution to the political impasse in Northern Ireland has never been more imperative. I urge the parties to continue to set aside their differences and reach agreement on the re-establishment of the power-sharing Executive.

So, as we approach the twentieth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, let's get the institutions up and running.

Let's have effective, devolved government in Northern Ireland.

Let's give the 1.8 million people in Northern Ireland the opportunity to have their voice fully heard in the Brexit negotiations.

Let's get the North South Ministerial Council back on track so we can co-operate to achieve the best possible outcome for all the people on the island.

Let's empower the Executive to come up with proposals and solutions that sense for Northern Ireland.

We are working hard to protect and grow our economy in the face of Brexit. However many of you are already feeling a Brexit effect, not least due to currency fluctuations having an adverse impact on businesses. General uncertainty surrounding the future relationship with the UK is also delaying investment decisions and long-term planning.

We are not complacent about these challenges. We have already taken action and there are a number of other measures in train to support businesses in the face of economic risks from Brexit.

This morning we will hear about the important work our Enterprise agencies are doing to help companies to get 'Brexit-ready', by enhancing competitiveness, promoting market diversification and up-skilling.

Later this year, this Government will finalise both a 20 year strategic development vision for Ireland and the investment strategy to make that vision a reality.

Ireland 2040 – The National Planning Framework - will be published alongside a 10 year National Development Plan demonstrating the potential of a country that knows the headwinds it must deal with, but which is also confident of its future and place amongst its nearest neighbours and across the world.

Both of these important initiatives will have a strong all-island dimension. Regardless of Brexit, it is in our common interest to work together on this island to ensure infrastructure is optimized.

For example, our 10 year capital plan will include measures to improve road links between Dublin and the North West and perhaps the rail service between Dublin and Belfast.

For this work to be advanced sensibly and effectively, it is desirable that we have a North South Ministerial Council in place and taking decisions. We can't do it on our own.

The Future of Europe

It is also worth remembering and understanding also that while Brexit is the most important thing happening in the EU from our perspective, things can look different when viewed elsewhere. In other countries issues such as migration, the Balkans, and relations with Russia are all of greater interest and concern. We need to be wise to that and sensitive to it.

In the last week or so we have heard significant speeches from a number of leaders – President Juncker and President Macron - setting out strong views about where the EU should be headed. This is a debate in which we must participate in a positive and constructive way, and focus on what we want not what we are against.

When the UK goes we will have lost a like-minded state with whom we were in agreement on many issues. So, we will need to strengthen other relationships and build new alliances.

We are and will remain part of the 27, welcoming new members in due course.

At the heart of Europe. A common European home that we helped to build.

We want to see an EU that delivers peace and prosperity for its people; that takes advantage of new economic opportunities, including from the digital revolution that we will discuss in Tallinn; that is open to trade and investment from China, Latin America, and Australia; that is engaged in the world as a force for good; that helps us to find answers to the great challenges our generation faces.

Yes, there are things that others argue for that we would not support –for example, some of the more ambitious proposals on an EU army and tax harmonisation for companies..

But we should have the confidence and conviction to bring our positive vision to the table too, and to sit down and engage as equal partners as we always have.

In terms of that positive vision we want to help work towards a banking union, and complete the internal market and digital single market. We will play our part in supporting a capital markets union, and greater cooperation on security, helping to manage migration, and ensuring that external action is taken on the major issues of the century such as climate change and Africa.

Conclusion

So, I hope you will find today's discussions informative and I thank you for your commitment to this important Dialogue. As we move into the next phase of the negotiations it is our intention to continue with this Dialogue, because we recognise its value as developments unfold. Finally, I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Tom Arnold, once again, for his able stewardship of this Dialogue.

Thank you.