
Speech at "Where lies the Future of Europe" event, Cork 30th June 2017

[Speech](#)

Minister Coveney - 31/7/17



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Distinguished Guests,

It is a great pleasure to be here in Cork to make my first substantive speech on Ireland's EU policy and our approach to the Future of Europe, in my new role as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. I would like to extend my thanks to our chair, Deirdre Clune, and her colleagues for organising this event and providing us with this opportunity to discuss such an important topic so crucial to Ireland's future.

Inevitably, the UK's decision to leave the EU has focussed increased attention on the future direction of the European Union, EU leaders met in the immediate aftermath of the UK referendum and launched a reflection process on the further development of the EU. Feeding into this reflection process, the European Commission presented a White Paper on the Future of Europe with the intention of starting a wide-ranging debate among the Governments and peoples of Europe on where our common future lies. I welcome this event as a part of this debate and look forward to hearing your views and the views of our people around the country over the coming months on this subject.

First, however, I would like to bring you up to date on Brexit.

Brexit

I must admit, I am pleased that the "B" word didn't make it into the title of the event!

Quite simply, Brexit cannot and should not define our engagement with the Future of Europe debate. That said, there is no getting away from the fact that an EU without the UK, currently a large Member State, will have an effect on the political dynamics within the EU. It is therefore important that we look at Ireland's place at heart of the EU in a post-Brexit European Union.

While the British referendum kick-started this new phase of discussion on the Future of Europe last autumn, periodic reviews of how the EU does what it does, are common and necessary. And with or without the UK, we – the EU – would need, and want, to talk about the future orientation of our Union. We are in the midst of a changing political landscape across Europe and we are grappling with major shifts globally, not least brought about by the implications of globalisation, migration, climate change and international terrorism. All these issues and developments challenge the current international order. And the EU is by no means immune from the probing and sometimes hostile questioning of national and international institutions. The EU and us – its Member States and citizens – must ask is the EU fit for purpose, to address these challenges of today and of the coming years?

This is no simple task, given the breadth of EU policy competence and the complexity of its structures and processes. These factors are the result of Treaties which have been carefully negotiated over many years. These Treaties created very careful balances between the EU institutions and Member States, between the EU institutions themselves, between big and small member States, between different Member States' priorities and interests. So even where it is desirable real change will not be easy.

Unavoidably at this present time, it is Brexit which dominates the media.

A simple search on Google, reveals a startling 118 [one hundred and eighteen] million hits in just over a half a second.

By contrast, “Future of Europe” throws up a mere 20 million hits – food for thought in itself.

I say this not to diminish the importance of Brexit – I would be the last person to do that – but Ireland and our remaining EU partners are rightly determined that Brexit cannot and should not derail or dominate the important, necessary day-to-day business of the EU itself, the work that is so necessary to the peace of our continent and the prosperity of our citizens.

As Minister, I am determined that we remain ambitious and focussed on our Brexit negotiation objectives while engaging fully with the future of Europe agenda. Consequently, in my forthcoming diplomatic engagements with EU partners I naturally want to talk about Brexit, but I also want to talk about other Union business.

Of course, in Ireland, Brexit has been mainstreamed in our public discourse for some time.

We became aware earlier than most, of the profound implications of Brexit for our Union, and of the unique and complex implications for Ireland.

My Cabinet portfolio - Foreign Minister with Special Responsibility for Brexit – attests to the centrality of Brexit in my own Department and across Government.

Indeed, since taking office just over two weeks ago, not one day has passed without a Brexit-related meeting or briefing.

This is with just cause.

I know from my previous ministerial portfolios, and from discussions at Cabinet, that no aspect of Irish life will be untouched by the UK's departure from the European Union. Ireland will be more affected than any other Member State. And the levels of public, political and media interest are greater than anywhere else among the 27.

Our unparalleled political, social, historic and economic links with the UK, demand therefore that we prepare thoroughly for the Brexit negotiations.

And we have.

At the highest political and official levels, a careful process of consultation, analysis and engagement was undertaken.

In preparing for the negotiations phase, we talked to our EU27 partners and explained to them the importance of our concerns.

Because for many of our partners – particularly when comes to the complexities of Northern Ireland – they had the impression that the issues were largely resolved. Having spent most of my first four weeks in Belfast seeking to restore the devolved Executive under the Good Friday Agreement demonstrates this is clearly not the case.

But in this brave new world of Brexit, it was incumbent on us to explain once again, the fragility of peace on this island and the particular relationship between Ireland and Britain.

As a result of our unprecedented level of political and diplomatic engagement, in April and May we secured critically important recognition at EU level for the special position of Ireland in the Brexit negotiations.

Core document after core document – from the European Council Guidelines, to the Negotiating Directives, to the European Parliament's Brexit resolution – confirmed the unique nature of our concerns and understanding of partners of the need for solutions.

In other words, our EU partners listened to us, and showed their solidarity in recognising Ireland's priorities as EU priorities.

Those priorities are clear:

Protect the peace process
no hard border on the island of Ireland
retain the Common Travel Area and associated reciprocal rights
and work for the closest possible future trading relationship with UK

And if further proof were needed of the EU's commitment to Irish priorities, when formal negotiations opened between Michel Barnier and David Davis last week, Irish issues were repeatedly highlighted, alongside but distinctly separate from, the other Article 50 issues. Our priority is now to progress the Ireland-specific priorities and to seek out, with our EU partners, the imaginative and flexible solutions required. As the negotiating Guidelines state, these must respect the integrity of the EU legal order. This will not be easy but we are committed to finding the best solution for Ireland. Of course, there are two sides in this negotiation and the UK will also need to come to the table with an open mind and in a spirit of compromise.

More broadly, important details to frame the handling of negotiations were agreed at the opening meeting of the negotiations on 19 June.

The sequencing point – how to get from Phase 1 to Phase 2 negotiations – is now clear: sufficient progress must be made on the exit issues, before we can address the question of the future EU-UK relationship. With effort and goodwill, I hope that this can happen quickly.

Also clear is the commitment to transparency around the process.

This is massively important.

If we want this process to be credible to EU citizens, then a transparent approach is imperative.

In short then, as opening rounds go, there were a lot of positive take-aways for both sides.

And let me dispel any myths that may persist out there: there is no EU agenda to punish the UK.

It's misleading and mischievous to suggest that this is the case.

As I heard at the General Affairs Council last week and from Michel Barnier when I met with him, the approach from both EU and UK negotiating positions has, at this very early stage, constructive and conciliatory in tone.

That said, we know there is a lot more work which needs to be progressed and many of the issues will be complex and difficult to resolve.

These negotiations present unprecedented challenges for Ireland and the EU.

We know that differences of opinion persist on key points like the composition of the financial settlement and the role of the ECJ, all of which will need careful handling in the weeks and months ahead.

And even in areas such as citizens' rights, where there is significant political will on both sides to strike an early and fair deal – reaching the technical solutions will be challenging.

Not least while the clock is ticking.

But let's focus on the positive.

I think that both sides can be pleased that negotiations got off to a broadly positive start in terms of tone and approach.

Certainly, it is critical that this positive momentum is maintained so that progress is made as quickly as possible on the many complex issues facing the negotiators.

By continuing this constructive approach, a successful outcome, in the interests of all, remains achievable.

And by that I mean, an orderly withdrawal, with an effective transitional arrangement leading to the closest possible relationship between the EU and the UK. The key is to minimise disruption and provide as much certainty as possible to our businesses and our people.

Frankly, not to reach such an agreement with a resulting disorderly exit would be damaging for all concerned and certainly disastrous for Ireland.

So, a good start overall, and work advances now at technical and official level, to progress issues before the next round of EU-UK talks on 17 July and ahead of the European Council in October where decisions will be made by the Heads of State and Government on whether sufficient progress has been made, including on the Irish specific issues, and on whether the conditions exist to move to phase 2, opening parallel discussions on the future relationship issues.

The Future of Europe

Now I'd like to turn to the substantive topic for tonight.

The European Union was originally envisaged as a peace and prosperity project and the past 60 years are evidence of the success of this vision. The European Union, as a community of values, founded on the rule of law, democracy and human rights, has remained a bastion of these values in the world. Over these 60 years the EU has become a zone of prosperity, creating an area where our citizens enjoy the highest living standards, the highest levels of social protection, the highest levels of labour rights, the highest protection of human rights in world history.

The European Union has, however, faced a series of crises in the past few years. As well as Brexit, the financial crisis, the migration crisis and recent terror attacks on EU soil have tested the EU's Member States and its institutions and have dented public confidence in the European Union.

We know that the European Union is not perfect. However, I firmly believe that membership of the European Union, and our capacity, to shape and influence the agenda of the Union, benefits our citizens and our businesses and allows us more say in the world..

Benefits of EU Membership

It is clear that Ireland has undergone fundamental changes over the course of our membership of the European Union. EU membership has brought us enormous benefits, including the opportunity to expand our horizons, strengthen our ties with the countries of mainland Europe and build a better life for our people. Our membership of the Single Market and the Customs Union has opened up trade without restrictions to a market of over 500 million people, provided full access to EU trade agreements with other major markets and a capacity to engage in global free trade that we could not have had on our own. It also allows our people to travel, study, work and live freely in all Member States if they choose to do so.

Ireland's climb from a poor rural backwater decimated by generations of emigration to the modern, dynamic, outward looking confident nation we are today owes a great deal to the Irish people's decision to join the then EEC in 1972.

Ireland in 2017 is a dynamic, prosperous and confident nation; an active and committed member of the European Union and the wider international community. We recognise that our economic, social and political interests are best served by our continued membership of the European Union and that our future prosperity depends on our membership.

Future of Europe process

I have already touched briefly on the reflection process on the Future of Europe. The celebrations surrounding the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome afforded EU leaders the opportunity to outline the achievements of the past six decades and to set out the main focus of the EU's agenda for the future. In the Rome Declaration, EU leaders committed to working towards four key aims: a safe and secure Europe; a prosperous and sustainable Europe; a social Europe and a stronger Europe. With these aims, the EU is responding to the concerns of its citizens with a further pledge to listen and respond to citizens' concerns and to engage with national parliaments.

The Commission's White Paper on the Future of the Europe addresses the challenges that Europe is facing and presents five scenarios for how the European Union could evolve by 2025. These scenarios cover a range of possibilities but are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. I am sure that Andy (Note: *Andy Klom, Head of Political Section, European Commission in Ireland also speaking at the event*) will speak more about the detail of the White Paper process, but I would like to welcome the publication of the White Paper and of the five reflection papers, the most recent of which was published just this week.

The White Paper contains much valuable food for thought: not just outlining the scenarios for how the EU might evolve but also about the international context as it is now and may develop over the coming decades. It takes an open and non-prescriptive approach and was presented as an initial contribution to a Europe-wide discussion and debate. I welcome this approach which is in keeping with the need to renew the EU's contract with its citizens.

There are many aspects to the debate on the Future of Europe and many different opinions on how we should proceed. One example is the recent references to a Europe of multiple speeds, which is favoured by some EU Member States and rejected by others. In practice, we already have a Europe of multiple speeds, of which the euro and Schengen are two examples.

Another aspect of the debate is the question of whether further Treaty change is required. At the start of the reflection process, Member States were generally in agreement that now was not the time for Treaty change, but recent discussions, particularly between France and Germany, suggest that it is not impossible that Treaty change could come back on the agenda earlier than expected. As we know, this could pose particular challenges for Ireland, but that cannot prevent us from

analysing ideas and proposals on their merits.

We have nothing to fear from engaging openly in these discussions over the coming months and years. The challenges I mentioned earlier to the current political and economic order are such that the EU and its Member States have no choice but to look seriously and in depth across its range of functions and its institutions, to ensure that the EU of tomorrow can continue to guarantee peace and prosperity for the next generation of EU citizens, from here on the banks of my own lovely Lee to the banks of the Danube and the bay of Naples.

The voices of all 27 Member States and all citizens of the EU should and will be taken into account, and that is as it should be.

It is thus clear that the debate on the Future of Europe has many facets and it is a crucial issue across Government as we consider and respond to the stimulating and challenging reflection papers put forward by the Commission on

- the social dimension of Europe
- deepening the Economic and Monetary Union
- harnessing globalisation
- the future of Europe's defence
- the future of EU finances.

None of these issues is straightforward, for Ireland or for any other Member State. They need to be analysed very carefully by relevant Ministers, officials, academics and experts. But while the details will be crucial we will also have not to lose sight of the overall challenges faced by the Union and the need to address both the concerns of citizens and the changing world around us.

One thing which is certain is that it is vital that the EU addresses the concerns of its citizens, and in this context, discussions on the future direction of our Union must be informed by public engagement in all EU Member States. Together with Brexit, it will be a key priority for me to ensure that Ireland contributes in a meaningful way to this debate and to help shape a future EU which delivers for our citizens and ensures a place for Ireland at the heart of Europe. My Department will support and foster robust engagement on these issues including with key civil society organisations and with the broader public. Tonight's meeting is a good start, and I look forward to many such events over the next year as the debate moves forward.

Closing

There is a growing sense that the EU has come out of a period of crisis and is moving forward, despite Brexit. The election of President Macron, the setback suffered by populist parties in recent EU elections and the return of all 27 countries to economic growth have contributed towards this feeling. It is important that we carry forward this sense of optimism into the debate on the future of the EU and continue to work together to shape an EU which delivers for its citizens.

Thank you.