

7.30

Draft Remarks by Minister Flanagan at a dinner to honour the European Association of Former Members of Parliament of the Member States of the Council of Europe

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to Dublin and to host you at Iveagh House this evening. I am very glad that your Bureau decided to hold its meeting in Dublin for the first time and I am sure that my Oireachtas colleagues have looked after you very well during your time here.

→ Alfonso Guerra ✓
Vincent Pons ✓
Paul J. King ✓

We are delighted to support your Association which provides a very valuable space for dialogue and cooperation among former Parliamentarians from across Europe, at a time when we need to focus more than ever on what all European States have in common.

Ireland has an in-depth understanding of the importance of dialogue, exchange and inclusion - brought about by our struggles to establish ourselves as a young nation and our efforts to bring peace and reconciliation to this island.

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Through membership of international organisations such as the EU and the Council of Europe, Ireland has been able to participate in an ongoing international conversation, a process of change and reflection, which sometimes reveals tension between deeply held beliefs within our society and which has often changed us for the better.

By working with our partners across Europe to develop and protect fundamental values and human rights, we have come to realise the extent of our commonality with the other European states. Our European identity is central to who we are and our membership of international organisations such as the Council of Europe is the bedrock of our diplomacy.

We have also, of course, invested heavily in our bilateral relationships, in both Europe and beyond. And we have found that these relationships are enhanced by shared membership of institutions and the identification of shared values and interests. Joint membership of the EU was a critical factor in the transformation of our relationship with the UK – one of many reasons why we did not want to see the UK leave. Nevertheless, we continue to have a very close working relationship with the UK, which in addition to being a major trading partner, is also our partner in supporting the peace process in Northern Ireland.

Those of us who have had the honour of representing their fellow citizens in Parliament and who know first-hand the cut and thrust of representative politics will have watched the results of yesterday's general election in the UK with great interest.

The Government has, of course, been following the outcome of the UK general election closely and we will continue to monitor developments over the coming period.

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- like Europe = the reason!*

Whenever the British Government is formed, we will engage with them through our well-established channels, most immediately in relation to the political situation in Northern Ireland, which requires our joint support.

These are challenging times for Europe. There are regional conflicts and unprecedented migratory pressures in our near neighbourhood. We live under the shadow of a continuing terrorist threat – as instanced in recent weeks and months by the cowardly and barbaric attacks targeting innocent civilians in Manchester, London, ^{Paris} Stockholm and St Petersburg.

More than ever, it is clear that no one State can successfully tackle these issues in isolation. Moreover, it is imperative that we work together, including through multilateral organisations and institutions such as the Council of Europe.

Brexit

I would like to turn now to a particular European challenge that is dominating the agenda here in Ireland – the decision of the UK to withdraw from the European Union.

The decision of the British people continues to make waves, not only across Europe and the world, but within the UK itself, as instanced by the outcome of the UK general election which took place yesterday.

It is far too early to start predicting what might be the impact on the Brexit negotiations and their outcome. However, the election result has caused uncertainty about the UK's approach to the negotiations. This will be very challenging but what is now clear is that with the formation of a new Government led by Prime Minister May, we are still on course for the negotiations to begin on 19 June.

As chief negotiator:
As Michel Barnier has reiterated this morning, the EU is ready to start the negotiations. It is essential that the negotiations get off to a positive start and they result in an orderly withdrawal.

"Brexit" is a term that began its life as a meaningless, but undeniably catchy, campaign slogan. Regrettably, it is now part of the daily lexicon of public and political discourse throughout Europe but especially in Ireland. Brexit is here to stay, although its meaning remains largely undefined.

UK exit

It will come as no surprise to you that the Irish government and people of Ireland deeply regretted the outcome of last year's referendum in the UK. We and the British - and the Danes - began our European journey together in 1973, so naturally we are disappointed that our paths are diverging at this point.

It is also clear that the UK's withdrawal from the EU poses unprecedented political, economic and diplomatic challenges for Ireland and I shall come these shortly.

At the outset, however, it is important to view this issue in a wider context, which I believe was perfectly captured by Secretary General (of the Council of Europe) Thorbjørn Jagland in his comments immediately after the referendum:

“The democratic decision in this referendum must be respected. The best way forward now is for the EU, in accordance with its best traditions, to work together with the UK government to obtain the most acceptable outcome for the citizens of the UK and Europe. Everybody should now focus on what unites our family of European nations; democracy, human rights and the rule of law.”

This was an important and balanced message of encouragement, which I am pleased to say has been heeded by the EU and the UK over the past twelve months.

Following the triggering of the formal process of withdrawal on 29 March, both the UK and the EU have set out their broad negotiating objectives.

In her letter to European Council President Tusk, Theresa May stated that *“we are leaving the European Union, but we are not leaving Europe – and we want to remain committed partners and allies to our friends across the continent”*.

The EU27 Member States have responded in kind, emphasising that strong and constructive ties will remain in both sides' interest and should encompass more than just trade.

The EU has also indicated that it stands ready to establish partnerships in areas unrelated to trade, in particular the fight against terrorism and international crime, as well as security, defence and foreign policy.

So, while I am no doubt that there will be some difficult moments in the negotiations to come, I believe that both the EU and the UK are acutely aware of their role within the wider “family of European nations”. I am optimistic that this sense of shared belonging and our common values will heighten our determination to find solutions when the going gets tough.

Ireland's Unique Issues

From an Irish perspective, it became very clear early in the Government's analysis of Brexit that the impacts of Brexit would be deep and extensive for Ireland and pose an unprecedented economic, political and diplomatic challenge for our country.

Over the past eleven months since the referendum in the UK, I and my Government colleagues have engaged in an extensive programme of engagement with our EU partners to ensure that our unique concerns are understood, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland, the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement. Just as will be the case for many, if not all, of you in the room here this evening, there was already a high degree of awareness amongst partners of the situation on this island, of the peace process and – perhaps to a lesser extent – the Good Friday Agreement itself.

But when it came to the detail, there has been a need to explain the very particular political and legal challenges that the UK's withdrawal poses and the specific needs that will arise within the context of the forthcoming negotiations between the EU and the UK.

In doing so, we emphasise the status of the Good Friday Agreement, an international agreement registered with the UN, and the particular responsibility which that requires of Ireland and the UK as co-guarantors. We have also highlighted that effectively everyone born in Northern Ireland is of right entitled to be an Irish citizen if they wish, and therefore an EU citizen. A crucial provision of the 1998 Agreement is the rights of the people of Northern Ireland to identify and be accepted as Irish or British or both. This situation is unparalleled in the EU.

A further matter of national interest is, of course, the avoidance of a hard border on the island of Ireland. As arguably the most emotive symbol of the peace process, the open border is essential to social and economic well-being on both parts of the island and to the further normalisation of relationships, following the difficult decades of the Troubles.

I have been greatly encouraged by the level of engagement and understanding demonstrated by our EU partners. Indeed, this was well captured by the EU's lead negotiator, Michel Barnier, during his recent address to the Joint Houses of the Oireachtas when he stated that Ireland's interests in the upcoming negotiations will be the EU's interests.

In practice, this has been reflected in the Guidelines adopted by the European Council, which include the goal of protecting the Good Friday Agreement and the gains of the peace process, including the need for “flexible and imaginative solutions” to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland.

A further important principle has also been acknowledged by the European Union in relation to the unique constitutional status of Northern Ireland. This is the acknowledgment that the Good Friday Agreement expressly provides for an agreed mechanism whereby a united Ireland may be brought about through peaceful and democratic means; and, in this regard, in accordance with international law, the entire territory of such a united Ireland would thus be part of the European Union.

We are also very happy that the EU’s negotiating position reflects the need to take full account of the situation of Irish citizens residing in Northern Ireland who will continue to enjoy rights as EU citizens as well as the need to address issues arising from Ireland’s unique geographic situation, including the transit of goods to and from Ireland via the UK.

Of course, our negotiating positions are simply the beginning and not the end of the process. I am under no illusions as to the technical and legal complexity that will be involved in finding solutions to Ireland’s unique issues, not least with regard to avoiding a hard border.

However, I have been struck by the very genuine willingness of our EU partners not only to listen to us, but to actively engage with the issues with a view to facilitating solutions.

Key members of the Commission the Council and the European Parliament have taken the time to visit the border region in order to build their understanding of the issue, including the EU's Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier. They have all agreed that there is no substitute for seeing – or rather in this case, not seeing – the border, and the indispensability of this for life on the ground.

For our part, we have stressed to our EU partners that any flexible and imaginative solutions explored must be compatible with our aim of protecting the integrity of the Single Market and Ireland's place in it. Ireland's response to Brexit is situated firmly within the context of our continued and unwavering support for EU membership. This is not only the Government's position, but also reflects the consistently high level of support in Ireland for our EU membership, irrespective of the challenges posed by Brexit.

Next Steps

As I have said, our immediate priority – as a member of the EU27 team – will be to ensure a smooth start to the process. The EU is prepared to start the negotiations and it now appears following the formation of a new Government today, against expectations given the result of yesterday's election, that the UK is now also ready to come to the table.

For Ireland, it is of critical importance that the discussions on the future EU-UK relationship can get underway as early as possible. However, we fully support the EU's approach, whereby sufficient progress must first be made on the key withdrawal priorities – namely citizens' rights, the financial settlement as well as border issues.

I know that these issues are likely to lead to some early disagreements between the EU and the UK. At moments where these might appear insurmountable, it will be critical that we step back and reflect again on the imperative of ensuring that we protect those values that unite us. Because these values of the EU and Council of Europe – respect for human rights, democracy, the rule of law – have been the cornerstone of European peace and prosperity. In this time of turbulence and transition, our shared commitment to these values has rarely felt more important.

In addressing the challenges we face, we must acknowledge the fact that many of our citizens, while sharing the importance of a Europe based on values, do not feel connected to Europe's institutions. Through the rich political experience of your members, your knowledge of the European institutions and, most importantly, your connection with the peoples of Europe, your association of former parliamentarians can play a vital role in bridging this gap and reconnecting the ideals of the European project with the people of Europe.

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