Statement by Minister of State Creighton to Seanad Éireann on Ireland’s Presidency of the European Council

26 February 2013

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Cathaoirleach

Members of the Seanad

Thank you for your invitation to address the Chamber on the first two months of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Ireland formally took over the Presidency on the 1st of January, but in reality, the Government had been in intensive Presidency mode since I last addressed the Seanad in late October.

Throughout November, the Government had a busy schedule of visits by Committees and political groups from the European Parliament culminating with the meeting between the Government and the Conference of Presidents. In December, the Cabinet approved the Irish Presidency programme, and the Tánaiste launched the Trio Presidency programme in Brussels with our partners from Lithuania and Greece.

The Irish programme, “for Stability, Jobs and Growth”, which has been laid before the Oireachtas, was formally launched in early January in advance of the visit to Dublin by the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy. The College of Commissioners visited Dublin on 10 January for the traditional start-of-Presidency meeting between the European Commission and the Government.

The Government also hosted a visit to Dublin by over 60 members of the Brussels press corps. This provided members of the Government with the opportunity not only to discuss Presidency issues, but also to send key messages about Ireland’s economic recovery to a wide international audience.

Following the Taoiseach’s address in mid-January to the European Parliament plenary on the priorities of the Irish Presidency, Irish Ministers made 27 presentations to European Parliament Committees on the Presidency programme.
The programme has also been presented to our partners in other Member States, and I have addressed the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee on our priorities. In all of our engagement with partners, we have stressed that we want our Presidency to reflect the best elements of Ireland’s six previous Presidencies: citizen-focused, impartial, businesslike, and results-driven.

Similarly the Irish Presidency programme contains ambitious, but not unrealistic goals aimed at promoting stability, sustainable economic growth and jobs across Europe, and all of our priorities are centred around delivering a better Europe for our citizens.

The positive reaction to our Presidency priorities from partners in other Member States, from the European institutions, and from European civil society has been encouraging. I am also grateful for the support that we have received from this House.

One of the core objectives of the programme is to promote stability and confidence in Europe’s economy through measures such as the Banking Union proposals and effectively implementing the EU’s enhanced economic governance measures. This is necessary to provide a stable foundation of sustainable economic recovery and employment creation. We are making good progress in this area.

The Government has also identified a range of proposals designed to stimulate growth and job creation. These include several important Single Market proposals, improved support for research and innovation across the EU, unemployment measures, particularly for young people, and widening access to education and training.

We are working intensively across all Council formations to deliver on these priorities. Incidentally, I welcome the news from the European Commission last week that Ireland has topped the latest EU Internal Market Scoreboard for transposing EU legislation into domestic law.

It is only the second time a Member State has got a perfect score and it is a first for Ireland. It shows that we are taking our EU responsibilities seriously and I would like to express my thanks to this House for the role they play in scrutinising and debating EU-related legislation.

Our Presidency objectives clearly reflect national political priorities but they also reflect concerns that are shared by people across the European Union. This is why making progress on these goals over the coming four months is essential for Ireland and essential for Europe.

We also want to ensure that our efforts leave a strong, positive legacy in the coming years. We all know how important it is for Ireland to maintain excellent relations with our partners and to demonstrate our commitment as a serious and engaged Member State.

We believe that the effective management of the Presidency can challenge the negative perceptions about Ireland that resulted from the crisis and can show that Ireland is a capable and credible international partner.

We have almost reached the one-third stage of the Presidency. While we face challenging months ahead and there is no room for complacency, the Government is broadly satisfied with progress made to date.
Let me summarise what we have achieved so far across several Council formations:

On 8 February, the European Council reached agreement on the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2014 to 2020. It agreed an overall amount of €960 billion in commitment appropriations. While the overall size of the MFF has been reduced by 3.5%, importantly, CAP and Cohesion spending were largely protected.

Negotiations were difficult, but outcome is a compromise that Member States are broadly satisfied with. Ireland did well. We protected our CAP allocation and secured a special allocation of €100 million for rural development.

We also secured a special allocation of €100 million from cohesion funding for the Border Midlands and Western Region.

I am particularly glad that we were able to secure €150 million for the PEACE programme which has supported such valuable projects in Northern Ireland and in our border counties.

There is a new Youth Employment Initiative which will provide funding for regions with youth unemployment rates above 25%, which includes both Irish regions and I will return to this later. Initial estimates are that Ireland will remain a net recipient for the lifetime of the new MFF - we should contribute about €10 billion and receive about €12 billion.

The Parliament’s assent is needed before the MFF can be adopted. It now falls to Ireland as Presidency to gain this assent. We aim to conclude negotiations in Council on a new MFF Regulation in April and then formally present the Regulation to the Parliament.

However, as Presidency we will need to engage well before that with the Parliament. It has to be said that obtaining the Parliament’s assent will be challenging.

I am confident, however, that with goodwill on all sides we can reach agreement on this before the end of our Presidency.

Timely implementation of the MFF is absolutely critical to underpin recovery across the EU on programmes ranging from Horizon 2020 to the COSME programme to support our SMEs through cohesion and regional funding.

Last week, the Presidency helped broker an agreement with the European Parliament on the ‘Two Pack’ economic governance legislation which is designed to improve budgetary and economic coordination among euro area members. The adoption of the proposals is a Presidency priority and will contribute to our objective of promoting greater stability and confidence in the euro area through more effective economic and fiscal coordination.

The Presidency is also committed to ensuring the effective implementation of the European Semester, the EU’s new system of economic and budgetary coordination, which we see as a key tool in restoring economic stability in Europe and creating the conditions for sustainable growth. The European Council will conclude and evaluate the first phase of the European Semester when it meets in mid-March.
Remaining on economic and financial issues, at the first meeting of the Ecofin Council last month, chaired by Minister Noonan, a decision was taken to move forward on an enhanced cooperation basis for a Financial Transaction Tax. Ireland will not be one of the participating countries but we are committed, in our role as Presidency, to act as an honest and impartial broker in the discussions.

The Presidency has also seen welcome progress on the trade front. As you recall from the programme, promoting the EU’s exports through enhanced trade agreements is an important Presidency priority for Ireland.

With 90% of global economic growth now taking place outside of the EU, it is essential that we seek to develop trade with key external partners. In our programme, we placed a particular emphasis on making progress on a trade agreement with the US.

On 12 February, President Obama called for a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and this was welcomed by the Presidency and EU leaders. The Government will now do all that it can to secure its goal of achieving a formal Council mandate for the start of negotiations on an agreement.

The Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation will chair a meeting of EU Trade Ministers in Dublin in April which will focus on driving this process forward, in addition to other trade-related issues. The potential benefits of a future partnership agreement are simply too great to ignore; it is estimated that a successful conclusion could lead to annual benefits of over €150 billion to the EU and US economies.

The Presidency will also seek to build on the progress on concluding EU-Canada free trade negotiations. Similar negotiations are also underway with several key Asian partners.

Remaining for a moment on international issues, the Government, in preparing the Presidency programme, also placed a strong emphasis on development and humanitarian issues, reflecting Ireland’s commitment to fighting global hunger and poverty.

At the recent meeting of EU Development Ministers chaired by Minister Costello, agreement was reached on the resumption of €250million in EU funding in 2013 to support democracy and peace in Mali and to provide assistance to displaced Malians to ensure that they have access to food and other basic services.

I am also looking forward to the conference being hosted by the Presidency with the Mary Robinson Foundation to seek solutions to the challenges of hunger, nutrition and climate change which affect the world’s poorest regions disproportionately.

Moving to the Single Market which is a major Presidency priority, I am pleased to note the signing of the Unified Patent Court agreement last week. The agreement will provide European SMEs and other businesses with a central one-stop shop for registering and protecting patents and with improved and more cost-effective access to patent protection at European level.

The Presidency is working on other outstanding issues under the Single Market Act I to promote economic competitiveness and growth.
Bringing down barriers that hinder citizen mobility across the EU is also an important Presidency focus during this European Year of Citizens. In addition to advancing a number of legislative proposals, we are also engaging in dialogue with citizens over the coming months about the rights we enjoy as EU citizens.

I hope we can spark a broader debate about what it means to be part of the European Union and how we would like the Union to evolve in the coming years. I want this debate to continue well beyond the Presidency.

In January, we held the first dialogue in Dublin City Hall with about 200 people present. More recently, the Tánaiste attended the second Citizens’ Dialogue in Cork. I look forward to the next meeting in Galway and over the coming months, I plan to engage in similar meetings throughout the country.

One question that has been raised at these events is what are we doing to tackle unemployment, and particularly youth unemployment. As you recall from my pre-Presidency meetings here in the Seanad, the Government considers that youth unemployment levels in Ireland and across Europe remain far too high and, if not addressed, will have very negative consequences for our families, communities and our societies.

This is why we made tackling the issue a key focus for our Presidency.

On 7 and 8 February, Ministers Burton and Bruton met their EU colleagues in Dublin to address unemployment issues and to assess ways of addressing the youth unemployment crisis more effectively.

One of the main proposals discussed was the Youth Guarantee, which is aimed at ensuring that young people who are not working or studying receive an offer of employment, continuing education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship. Based on discussions at the meeting we are hopeful that agreement will be reached at the EPSCO Council meeting later this week.

Additionally, as I mentioned earlier, the European Council has also agreed on a €6 billion Youth Employment Initiative fund as part of the MFF for 2014-2020. This funding is aimed at regions with the highest rates of youth joblessness to help get young people back to work. The Irish Presidency will work intensively to secure the European Parliament’s consent to the 2014-20 Budget to ensure that these funds can be mobilised without delay.

Food quality and security is of critical importance to Ireland from both a consumer perspective and as one of our major export sectors. All members of this House will agree with me that the recent revelations on the mislabelling of food products are simply unacceptable.

Following the initial discovery in January by the Irish Food Safety Authority, the pan-European scale of this problem has become evident. This is why the Minister for Agriculture, as chair of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council, responded swiftly to address the issue by calling a meeting that agreed on control and testing in all Member States to reassure consumers.

The issue was also under discussion at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council yesterday.
The issues that I have highlighted are just a sample of the work that the Presidency has led over the past seven weeks in nine Council meetings, five informal Council meetings, many other several high-level meetings and countless Working Group meetings. All of the meetings that the Presidency chairs have one thing in common; to drive forward progress.

On a personal level, I invited my counterparts from other Member States to an informal Ministerial meeting focussing on democratic legitimacy and accountability in the European Union. I do not need to remind this House of the importance of this topic as we move towards closer integration at EU level in response to the crisis.

I welcome the engagement of the Oireachtas on these issues and I welcome in particular the Parliamentary Dimension of our Presidency which I believe contributes in no small way to the democratic process in the Union. I know you have already had the COSAC Chairpersons meeting and that the Chairs of the Finance Committees of the EU Member States and of the European Parliament were here yesterday and today.

I also took the opportunity provided by the Informal meeting of European Affairs Ministers to invite to Dublin my counterparts from the EU candidate countries and also from the potential candidates of the Western Balkans. Ireland has always made clear its belief in the role of the enlargement process for securing peace and prosperity in Europe.

I am also continuing to meet my counterparts at bilateral level at EU meetings and also in other EU capitals. I am the Council’s main representative at debates at Plenary sessions of the European Parliament in Strasbourg and we have had two very busy sessions in January and February.

It is clear that since the introduction of the Lisbon Treaty, one of the key roles of the Presidency is to represent the Council at the European Parliament and to negotiate on its behalf in order to reach compromise on the legislative agenda. It is a demanding role but one which is crucial for delivering our Presidency priorities.

Before concluding, I would like to outline some of the key tasks and challenges that face the Irish Presidency over the coming months. I have already mentioned that securing agreement on the MFF with the European Parliament will be one of the major challenges facing the Presidency.

In parallel, we will also be focussing on the CAP and CFP reform, Horizon 2020 and on structural funds. The Presidency will also push for agreement on Banking Union proposals to ensure that the commitments made last June will be delivered. In addition to working to advance the Single Market and digital economy proposals identified to drive growth, the Presidency will also work intensively to secure a Council mandate for EU-US trade talks.

We look forward to making good progress on these issues as we face into the remaining months of our Presidency. I would like to thank this House again for its support to date, and I hope that I will return to you later during the Presidency with positive news on our Presidency objectives.

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