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Chomhairle an Aontais Eorpaigh
Irish Presidency of the Council
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**Presentation of Irish Presidency priorities to the European
Parliament Constitutional Affairs Committee (AFCO) by Minister for
European Affairs, Lucinda Creighton TD**

Tuesday, 22 January 2013

Chairman Casini, Honourable members of the AFCO Committee,

I am very pleased to be here today to present the priorities of the Irish Presidency to your Committee. Following my meeting in Dublin in November with Chairman Casini and the AFCO delegation and my meeting in Strasbourg last week with the Conference of Committee Chairs, I welcome this opportunity for a more detailed engagement with you on the important proposals within your Committee's area of responsibility.

At the outset, let me say a few general words about our approach to the Presidency. As the Taoiseach emphasised in his address to the Parliament last week in Strasbourg, ours will be a results-focussed Presidency. The European Parliament and its Committees are indispensable to our task.

In leading Ireland's preparations for our Presidency, one of the areas I consistently sought to prioritise was a deeper engagement with the European Parliament across all the areas of our Presidency work. In the lead-in to our Presidency, we engaged extensively with the Parliament, with over 35 visits to Brussels and Strasbourg by Irish Ministers in an eighteen month period. Our Ministers met with Committee Chairs, rapporteurs and shadow rapporteurs, in

order to build familiarity with the Parliament's perspectives and so as to be ready to work effectively with you from day one of our Presidency. Our engagements in Dublin – with President Schulz in October, with the main political groups and the Conference of Presidents in November, and with a number of Committees, including this Committee, – were both valuable and enjoyable, and further enhanced our understanding of the key issues from the Parliament's perspective.

Even as the detailed work of our Presidency has now commenced in earnest, this week marks the end of the launch phase of the Presidency. All of our Ministers will engage with Committees in an intensive series of meetings today and tomorrow. We have had many useful discussions over the past number of weeks – with President Van Rompuy, President Barroso and the College of Commissioners in Dublin – and with President Schulz, political group leaders and MEPs in Strasbourg.

Our dialogue has been invaluable. It has allowed us to understand and appreciate each other's positions. Of course, this dialogue will continue throughout our six months. So let me emphasise - I am here today not only to answer your questions – I am also seeking your views, your ideas and your perspectives. A dialogue with you is particularly important given the complex work which the AFCO Committee is entrusted with.

Before I address specific dossiers, I'd like to place the work which is ahead of us in context. Our Union is in the midst of possibly its most challenging period. Many citizens doubt our ability to deal effectively with the economic crisis and many question the democratic legitimacy of decisions taken.

In framing our Presidency priorities, we were very conscious of these challenges. Across each Council formation, we sought to identify those proposals which could best deliver the three things which Europe's citizens need and demand - stability, jobs and growth.

This means working hard to deliver on Banking Union and the European Semester process, prioritising the Single Market and the Digital Single Market. It means tackling youth unemployment through targeted measures, prioritising research and innovation, promoting cohesion and increasing trade with key partners. It also means securing agreement with the Parliament on the Multi-annual Financial Framework in order to deliver on the Union's objectives to 2020.

Ireland's Presidency priorities must be underpinned not only by an agreement in the immediate term on adequate funding, but also by effective governance arrangements – founded on democratic principles - over the longer-term. For my own part, I hosted an **informal meeting of Ministers and State Secretaries for European Affairs** in Dublin yesterday.

I was very pleased to have the participation of members of this Committee - Mr Verhofstadt and Mr Gaultieri, along with Mr Brok - in the discussions. We had a lively and interesting exchange of views on the topic of **“Strengthening Democratic Legitimacy and Accountability”** with the participation of representatives of the Irish Parliament.

It was clear from our discussions that there is consensus that national parliaments and the European Parliament must play a key role. In this regard, I am very aware of the work of this Committee on **“Multi-tier Governance”** - which I am sure will be a valuable contribution to the evolving dialogue.

Of course the European Parliament will hold its own dialogue with national parliaments in Brussels next week on the particular challenges of the European semester. And I know that the COSAC Chairs will also discuss the future of EMU with Commissioner Sefcovic at the end of this month. These are important debates and the Irish Presidency will closely follow their outcome.

Ultimately the challenge is to ensure that the respective roles of the European Parliament and national parliaments amount to a system of accountability which is comprehensive and effective and – equally importantly – which is seen to be so by citizens.

This will not be an easy task. Engaging citizens is an ongoing challenge, particularly when we have complex proposals on the future governance of Europe which foresee possible Treaty change. We must meet this challenge head-on. As the elected representatives of citizens, MEPs and national parliamentarians clearly have a significant part to play. I also welcome Commissioner Reding's Citizen's Dialogue Initiative which I was pleased to be part of recently in Dublin.

The Committee may be interested to hear that the Irish people are keeping faith with the EU. In a survey conducted in early January (by European Movement Ireland / Red C),

- 85% of those polled believe that Ireland should remain as part of the EU and
- 83% believe that, on balance, Ireland has benefitted from the EU.

These are very encouraging figures but we cannot be complacent. From Ireland's experience of referenda on Treaty change, we especially know that serving the interests of citizens must always be uppermost in our minds when

we embark on institutional change. This is a concern which we share with you as members of the European Parliament.

I'd now like to move to the specific dossiers which we will be working on with you over the coming months.

First and foremost among them is the proposal on the **statute and funding of political parties**.

At this time of great change and challenge for the Union;

At this time of closer financial and economic integration for the Union, it is more crucial than ever that our citizens feel involved and become more engaged on EU issues. I believe that the European political parties have an important role to play in this area. As such, I welcome the proposal on the statute and funding of European political parties with the aim of supporting a stronger and more vibrant political space at European level.

Building on the good work of the Cyprus Presidency, we are ambitious for progress on this file during our Presidency and very conscious of the value of having the new arrangements in place in time for the next European elections. I am fully aware of the work here in the AFCO Committee, and have already been briefed on your most recent discussions yesterday. I look forward to working with the **Rapporteur Madame Giannakou**, the shadow rapporteurs, and **Mr Guerro Salom** as the rapporteur on the AFCO Committee opinion on the amendments to the financial regulation.

Perhaps it would be helpful if I set out in more detail how we plan to handle this proposal under the Irish Presidency. Our aim is to secure a clear Council negotiating mandate in the first half of our Presidency so that we can then

move quickly to undertake substantive negotiations with the Parliament. I am pleased to report that detailed discussions have already begun in the working group.

The meeting just before Christmas of Minister Mavroyiannis, Commissioner Sefcovic and Madame Giannakou and Mr Guerrero Salom, from the Parliament, was a fruitful one. It was particularly useful as an opportunity for the three Institutions to set out their initial thinking and perspectives. As I am sure you will be aware from these discussions, there are a number of areas of substantial concern in Council including –

- the potential implications for national law;
- some concerns about the role of the EP in the process of registration verification
- and the budgetary implications and new funding provisions of the proposal.

These will require careful consideration and a constructive and pragmatic approach from all sides.

Despite the challenges, I can assure you of the very full engagement of the Member States on this proposal and, indeed, of national parliaments. I am optimistic that very real progress can be made under the Irish Presidency.

A second significant proposal is the ongoing work on **European Parliament Committees of Inquiry**. The Council fully respects the Parliament's right to establish Committees of Inquiry, as well as the Parliament's right to propose the detailed provisions governing the Committees of Inquiry in full accordance with A226 of the Treaties.

However, as you are aware, as far back as the Danish Presidency, the Council outlined its concerns regarding aspects of the proposal in the Martin Report - including on

- investigative means,
- on the spot investigations;
- access to documents,
- hearings of Member States and
- EU staff and sanctions.

We hope it will be possible for the Parliament to work with us to address the issues identified in the Coreper mandate as problematic for the Member States. We welcome the fact that it was possible for discussions on this file to resume towards the end of the Cyprus Presidency. I am aware that there are useful discussions ongoing at technical level and I look forward to steady progress on this file.

Let me turn briefly to two issues linked to the next EP elections.

Firstly, the **date of the 2014 elections**. We have noted carefully the Parliament's resolution setting out its preference for an election date in May rather than June. The Irish Presidency has set out a clear timeline for this work with a view to getting a consensus in Council in good time to allow for consultation of the EP and for the formal decision to be taken under the Irish Presidency.

Secondly, I am aware that AFCO is now preparing a report on the **redistribution of seats to take account of the accession of Croatia** while remaining within the limit of 751 MEPs set down by the Treaty.

As any politician knows, this is a very sensitive issue, so suffice to say that - we welcome that the Parliament is making progress on preparing its proposal to the European Council so that the necessary decisions can be taken in a timely fashion in advance of the 2014 elections.

I look forward to our dialogue this morning and to our ongoing engagement on these and other issues as the Irish Presidency progresses.

Thank you for your attention.