



Uachtaránacht na hÉireann ar
Chomhairle an Aontais Eorpaigh
Irish Presidency of the Council
of the European Union
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**Introductory address to the European Parliament's Committee
on Employment and Social Affairs by Joan Burton T.D.
Minister for Social Protection, presenting Ireland's Council
Presidency programme**

Tuesday 23rd January 2013

Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

*Madame Chair, Vice-Chairs and Members of the IMCO Parliamentary
Committee,*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As Minister for Social Protection, my role is a wide one. As well as responsibility for items that would be traditionally regarded as social security and social inclusion, I have responsibility for ensuring that unemployed people get their best chance to get back to work, through a wide range of activation, training and internship options. During the Irish Presidency, I will be paying particular attention to these issues within the EPSCO Council. .

One of the highlights of my work during the Presidency will be to bring Ministers of Employment and Social Affairs to Dublin in February 2013 for an informal Ministerial Meeting. The general theme for the meeting will be “Supporting People into Employment”, with a particular emphasis on youth unemployment, including the Youth Guarantee. I plan that the discussion of the Youth Guarantee in this informal setting in Dublin will complement the more formal debate in Brussels, and ensure its adoption as quickly as possible.

The informal will also include discussions on the Public Employment Services across Europe, skills, jobless households, the engagement of older women in the labour force as well as meetings with the Social Partners and with the Social Platform at a European level.

Youth Guarantee

Turning now to the formal Council programme, I have identified the Recommendation on the Youth Guarantee as one of my particular priorities. Europe must respond to the threat that high unemployment poses to our young people, both now and in their future working lives. The scarring impacts of youth unemployment will be with us for decades if we don't act urgently. We are determined to reach an agreement on the text as soon as possible.

In order to reach a compromise, we fully recognise that the various positions will have to take into account the different starting points of each Member State. The diversity of their institutional set-up and the capacity of the various labour market participants, as well as financial and budgetary constraints will have to be considered. What will count in the end is the commitment and actions of Member States to implement the guarantee so that tangible results can soon be achieved.

We strongly welcome Parliament's interest on this issue, expressed in various resolutions over recent years and most recently in your debate in Strasbourg last Monday evening. Parliament will have noted that the proposal is for a Council Recommendation, and as such, it will not be legally binding on Member States. The objective of the Presidency is, however, to ensure that Member States fully identify their youth employment objectives and policies in the text, and will therefore implement it in the interest of their younger population.

We look forward to hearing the Parliament's views on the Youth Guarantee to be taken into account in the best possible way when the Council finalises the text of the Recommendation.

Fund for European Aid for the Most Deprived

As you know, the Commission has published a proposal for a new scheme of aid for Europe's most deprived citizens. The Irish Presidency has the aim of achieving agreement in Council and with the Parliament to enable implementation of this regulation by the 1st January 2014.

The level of funding is, of course, dependent on the successful outcome of negotiations on the Multi-annual Financial Framework.

While this is a successor to the EU's Food Aid Programme, this new proposal is about much more than food aid and includes a requirement that the bodies providing the assistance must have a social inclusion focus. The Presidency is committed to working with the Council and negotiating and co-operating with the Parliament in order that the earliest possible decision can be achieved.

Minimum Requirement for Improving the Acquisition and Preservation of Supplementary Pension Rights.

All of our social protection systems are challenged by the demographic aging. The reforms adopted or envisaged by most Member States are moving towards

the further development of supplementary schemes. It is, therefore, urgent to ensure that the rules governing the operation of these schemes support the freedom of movement of workers across Member States.

The proposed Directive on minimum requirements for enhancing worker mobility by improving the acquisition and preservation of supplementary pension rights (the so-called 'Portability Directive') goes back some years. Various Presidencies have made intensive efforts to reach agreement in Council on this dossier. The Irish Presidency will seek to make progress despite the difficulties experienced to date, in particular because of the increasing necessity for this directive. Labour market mobility is more important than ever given the economic crisis, high levels of unemployment and imbalances in employment opportunities across the EU. Also, supplementary pensions are growing in importance both in relative and nominal terms in many parts of the EU, and therefore are increasingly significant in the context of free movement of workers.

I know that the European Parliament has passed a resolution in Jan 2011 that Member States must act to address issues of pension portability. Building on the work of the Cyprus Presidency, the Irish Presidency is determined to move this dossier forward through intensive discussions at the level of the Working Party.

Europe 2020 and the European Semester

As Minister Bruton has already signalled, the Irish Presidency will seek to ensure that the EPSCO Council plays an effective role in the semester process. The Irish Presidency considers that the main strength of the European Semester is its holistic approach and we have worked closely with all parties to ensure

that an integrated “roadmap” for the Semester was presented before the end of 2012. The Irish Presidency’s roadmap for the semester emphasises the need to maintain an integrated approach to country surveillance, as well as the need to reinforce further the ownership by the Member States of the surveillance process.

The Social Investment Package

I hold strong views that the economic crisis must not distract us from the fact that the EU also has a equally important social dimension. I understand that the Commission plans to introduce and adopt a Social Inclusion Package in February, to complement the Employment Package published last year. While I cannot comment on specific aspects of the package, I would make the point that presenting such a package makes an important statement that social policy is an equally important and integral part of Europe 2020 and the response of the Presidency will reflect this in every aspect.

Conclusion

Thank you for your attention. I will now hand you over to my colleague, Ciaran Cannon, Minister of State for Training and Skills who will complete the presentation of the Irish Presidency programme for EPSCO.

