

CCBS – LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

17/04/2015 - 23/04/2015



Northern Ireland
Assembly

20 April 2015

Plenary Debate

Fuel Laundering

Summary: Here the Assembly passed a motion to express its concern at the continuing high levels of fuel laundering, the organised criminal activity surrounding it and the evident lack of criminal prosecutions; notes the environmental damage caused to the countryside; and recognised the financial losses suffered by Her Majesty's Treasury and legitimate fuel operators and the consequential serious implications for the local economy; and called on the Minister of Justice to ensure action is taken at every operational level to secure greater numbers of prosecutions for this serious crime.

Mr Bell: The nefarious criminal activity of those who engage in fuel laundering has consequences for each and every person in Northern Ireland, yet, up to now, there has been a lamentable failure to adequately tackle the problem. The scale of the situation is probably best summarised by the estimate of just how much illegal fuel there is in Northern Ireland. By a conservative estimate, it stands at 12% to 13% of the total. Thirteen litres out of every 100 litres of fuel in Northern Ireland is believed to be illegal. I compare that to the other parts of the United Kingdom, where the figure stands at 2% falling into that category.

Those are shocking figures, by any stretch of the imagination, but especially so when one takes a moment to consider how much tax and duty has been avoided. One reasonable estimate of the figures suggests that £80 million is lost annually. Many others that I have spoken to in the field — and I have spoken to academics, businesses and the people who are selling fuel legitimately — tell me that the true figure is much higher than that.

On 31 January 2013, the BBC reported that no one had been subject to a custodial sentence for engaging in fuel laundering in Northern Ireland. That revelation was made following the discovery of a fuel laundering plant in County Armagh that was capable of producing 25 million litres of

laundered fuel, helping those responsible to avoid £18 million in tax and duty in one single 12-month period.

So allowing for a starting salary of teachers and nurses of somewhere in the region of just over £21,000 a year, this one fuel laundering operation alone could pay for 857 new nurses in our local health service. With £18 million, we could employ somewhere in the region of an additional 817 new teachers. I am seeing what somewhere in the region of a quarter of that could do to improve literacy and numeracy in our primary sector and the GCSE sector. Can you imagine what we could do with 817 new teachers? These are the proceeds of just one plant over the period of one year. The people responsible for this theft are inflicting real and lasting damage upon all our public services by their actions.

Their selfishness is not confined to merely taking money out of the economy and public services. The criminals responsible for these crimes have no compunctions or scruples about poisoning the environment and the people who live near their illegal operations. Fuel laundering is a dirty business. The toxic waste and other dangerous by-products of the process of fuel laundering are immense. The disposal of such dangerous substances is extremely hazardous for the people who come into contact with them. Fuel launderers put their own health at risk. That, for criminals, is a matter for themselves, but we should all be concerned that public services, our firemen and firewomen, our policemen and policewomen and our DOE staff are being put in harm's way by the fuel laundering gangs' illegal actions. Given the dangerous nature of the substances associated with fuel laundering, it defies belief that any person would choose to casually dump these products into a water supply or to leave them abandoned in places that the public use, such as forest walks and nature trails. Yet that is precisely what is happening on a day and daily basis.

On 22 February this year, the 'Sunday Independent' carried a story about the criminal activities of the republican movement in the south Armagh, Louth and Monaghan areas. The paper showed that four 1,000-litre containers of poison, the by-product of fuel laundering, were dumped in a drain that feeds directly into Lough Ross, which supplies the drinking water for the entirety of Dundalk and parts of south Armagh. Let me quote what the newspaper article said: "However, sources in south Armagh — speaking on strict conditions of anonymity — said that they believe both the Irish and British governments are turning a 'blind eye' to the lethal trade in fuel laundering."

One source said: "There's been stuff dumped there for years. It's the same all round here. People have complained but nothing happens." They said that the council come and look at it and do nothing. They continued: "It's running straight into the lough and that's the drinking water for Dundalk and Crossmaglen. The pumping station for the water to Cross[maglen] is just around the shore of the lough from that place. They're poisoning their own people."

I hope that all of us across the House make absolutely clear that anyone with information about this criminal activity should come forward and share it with the police on either side of the border. We welcome the National Crime Agency's involvement in tackling these criminal gangs. We want everyone to make clear that people should be free to give this information without fear of retaliation to themselves, their businesses or their property. A full and unambiguous statement is all that will suffice. There has been some action from the Department of Justice on the issue, and I welcome that.

However, I think that most people who have looked at the situation agree that, so far, the fight is not being won by the legitimate forces of law and order. Rather, as we sit here today, the gangsters have the upper hand. Measures designed to go after the distributors of illegal fuels are fine insofar as they go, but people want to see the problem tackled at source. Measures such as the introduction of a new fuel marker that is harder to wash out, which was announced by the Government in February last year, are welcome. However, as I have communicated directly to the British Government, I have been contacted by businesses that indicate that they have a superior marker. The best marker should be used. I have also been contacted by leading academics, sat with them and discussed it. It is not good enough to have a marker that can be washed out by anybody with basic GCSE chemistry skills. That is not good enough.

Link: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-20-04-2015.pdf>

Questions to the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety Suicide: Cross-departmental Support

Summary: Here the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety was asked by a Member what discussions he has had with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland relating to tackling suicide. The Minister noted that both jurisdictions are bringing forward strategies to deal with suicide, however the Minister noted that as “we are at different stages in the process, and we agreed at that meeting that there was little merit in having a joint all-island strategy.”

Ms McCorley: What discussions, if any, has the Minister had with his counterpart in the South in relation to tackling suicide and the promotion of suicide awareness programmes?

Mr Wells: I had a very useful meeting with the Health Minister of the Irish Republic last Wednesday in Londonderry, in Altnagelvin Hospital. We found ourselves singing from the same hymn sheet on this issue. Both jurisdictions are bringing forward strategies to deal with suicide. We are at different stages in the process, and we agreed at that meeting that there was little merit in having a joint all-island strategy but that there was huge merit in officials from both jurisdictions getting together on a regular basis to share best practice on this very important issue.

We identified that, on both sides of the border, the particularly difficult area is males between 15 and 50, particularly unemployed males from socially and economically disadvantaged areas, and the important role that alcohol unfortunately played in suicides. Therefore, both jurisdictions agreed that that was the core area that we needed to analyse in particular. We are going to work together to see what is best practice in the Republic and Northern Ireland.

Link: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-20-04-2015.pdf>



15 April 2015

Department of Health: Health Services Access

Summary: In a written answer to a question regarding access to cross-border care for children with life-limiting and terminal conditions, Kathleen Lynch that the Department and the HSE are identifying “potential opportunities for improving the delivery of healthcare through clinical linkages and partnerships on an all-island basis, such as the provision of radiotherapy services at Altnagelvin or the development of an all-island model of care for congenital heart disease.”

Billy Kelleher (Cork North Central, Fianna Fail): To ask the Minister for Health the status-steps taken to implement the proposal, as discussed with him during a meeting with Our Children's Voice representatives on 4 February 2015, for an agreement to allow children with life-limiting and terminal conditions to access cross-Border care in hospitals in Enniskillen, Derry and Belfast, and to allow them to receive respite and end-of-life care in Belfast Children's Hospice, instead of having to endure lengthy four-hour journeys to Dublin for the provision of such services.

Kathleen Lynch (Cork North Central, Labour): The National Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases has been established, led by Professor Eileen Treacy. This will ultimately be a channel for advancing and implementing recommendations in the HSE Rare Diseases Plan. To support the Clinical Programme, a Rare Disease Office is being established by the HSE and it is anticipated that this office will be in place later this year.

Work is ongoing within my Department and the HSE to identify potential opportunities for improving the delivery of healthcare through clinical linkages and partnerships on an all-island basis, such as the provision of radiotherapy services at Altnagelvin or the development of an all-island model of care for congenital heart disease. The Rare Disease plan recognises that efforts should be made to realise shared benefits for rare disease patients on the island of Ireland. Officials from my Department have met with their counterparts in Northern Ireland to consider these issues. The subject of Rare Diseases has also been discussed as a bilateral issue at the North South Ministerial Council. There is broad agreement in principle to identify specialist areas for future rare disease collaboration and develop these further. In this context, my Department is in consultation with the HSE regarding the scope that may exist for cross border hospice care for children with life limiting and terminal conditions. Any new arrangements would have to be discussed with, and agreed by, the relevant authorities in Northern Ireland.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) in Northern Ireland has carried out a public consultation on its draft implementation plan for the UK Strategy for Rare Diseases, which was published in November 2013. Under theme 6, “Collaboration between Northern Ireland

and the Republic of Ireland”, the Northern Ireland draft Plan commits the DHSSPS to identifying opportunities to work with healthcare policy makers, commissioners and providers in the Republic of Ireland and organisations involved in research in the field of rare diseases. The intention of this would be to maximise the potential benefits arising from collaboration to meet the respective needs of both jurisdictions.

Link: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2015-04-15a.1524&s=cross+border#g1525.q>

16 April 2015

Public Accounts Committee

Special Report 90 of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General: The Bytel Project

Summary: Here the PAC examined the report on the Bytel project, which was jointly carried out by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General in the Republic of Ireland, which concerns a cross-border broadband project aimed to provide high-speed connectivity on a line between Belfast and Dublin. The Bytel project was grant-aided by the EU-funded INTERREG III programme under a measure designed to improve inter-regional economic infrastructure. According to the evidence provided to the Committee by Seamus McCarthy (Comptroller and Auditor General) “there were major failings at each stage in the handling of the project.” However, Mr McCarthy advised that his “primary interest, and that of [his] counterpart in Northern Ireland, was to identify any lessons to be learned from the management of this project which could improve the administration of EU-funded projects in a cross-Border context and more generally.”

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: Special Report No. 90 is the result of a co-ordinated examination between my office and the Northern Ireland Audit Office, NIAO. It concerns a cross-Border broadband project which aimed to provide high-speed connectivity on a line between Belfast and Dublin. The project promoter was Bytel Networks Limited. The Bytel project was grant-aided by the EU-funded INTERREG III programme under a measure designed to improve inter-regional economic infrastructure. The Special EU Programme Body, SEUPB, was accountable to the Government, the European Commission and the Northern Ireland Executive for the management and delivery of the INTERREG III programme, which ran from 2000 to 2006. SEUPB appointed the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, DETI, in Northern Ireland and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources as joint implementing agents for the measure.

In October 2004, the two Departments offered grant funding of €4.3 million to Bytel, based on estimated total project costs of €12.4 million. At just under 35% of the project cost, the grant offered was almost the maximum payable, and the grant was paid in full between November 2004 and November 2005. Subsequently, it was found that almost none of the project spend was eligible for EU grant assistance, and that the actual project costs were significantly lower than the projected €12.4 million. There were major failings at each stage in the handling of the project. The project proposal only narrowly passed the assessment for entry to the EU programme. There were weaknesses in the project appraisal, including weaknesses in the definition of what was to be delivered by Bytel. There was little evidence to support the projected project costs. The strength of a

proposed partnership between Bytel and a company called Aurora Telecom was also not probed adequately. When Aurora withdrew from the project and was replaced by another service provider, the nature of the project changed significantly and the project costs fell. This should have led the Departments to reappraise the project and recalculate the grant payable, but this did not happen.

The two Departments were responsible for checking and approving Bytel's claims for grant payments. The first such payment included €1.3 million for the purchase of equipment that was to have been paid for from Bytel's resources. That equipment, bought from a sister company in the Bytel group, was not ultimately used in the project. There is a doubt as to the market value of the equipment. The final claim for €2.07 million contained no backup or verification evidence but, despite this, was paid in full. The Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources considered that it had no direct role in this area and it relied on DETI and on other advisers for assurance that expenditure claimed by the project promoter was valid. In circumstances in which it was relying on others for assurance about the validity of payments, the approach taken by the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources showed, in my view, a lack of awareness of the risks. There was no evidence to show that it had put appropriate controls or checks in place.

The Departments missed an early opportunity to identify problems with the project. Whistleblowing allegations were made to DETI by a director of the Bytel company in June 2006. An internal investigation was conducted by DETI and concluded that no further action was necessary. However, its investigation was later found not to have been sufficiently rigorous or independent and its findings were not supported by adequate evidence. The Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources was made aware of the allegations by DETI but decided not to attend a meeting with the person who had made them. Further allegations about the project were made to the NIAO in June 2008 and were referred to DETI, which commissioned a review of the project. By September 2009 it found that there had been irregularities. DETI only informed the SEUPB that there was a possible irregularity in May 2010, and informed the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in December 2010. Details of the irregularity were only forwarded to both in February 2011. A further review of the project was then commissioned by SEUPB, which found that 97% of the €4.3 million paid to Bytel was based on ineligible expenditure and should not have been paid.

My primary interest, and that of my counterpart in Northern Ireland, **was to identify any lessons to be learned from the management of this project which could improve the administration of EU-funded projects in a cross-Border context and more generally.** The very complex arrangements put in place for the administration and funding of the INTERREG III programme contributed to the delay within the bodies concerned in recognising that a financial loss had occurred, in reporting the loss and in accepting the appropriate degree of responsibility for its occurrence. We have tried to summarise the complexity of arrangements in Figure 2.2 of the special report. As members will see, there is nothing simple about the relationships. The illustration shows the funding flows and the number of agents involved in the project. Almost inevitably, the complexity of the arrangements and the number of actors involved led to a lack of clarity about roles in the oversight of the grant. The outcome in this case points to a need for more straightforward accountability arrangements for future cross-Border projects, with a reduced number of layers and clearer definitions of each agency's responsibilities.

A key feature of the management of grant administration for the project was the poor sharing of information between the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and DETI. Formally, as joint implementing agents, both Departments had equal responsibility for the measure. Each had the same agreement with SEUPB but, significantly, they had no formal agreement between themselves. The communication arrangements between the Departments were informal or *ad hoc*. In my view, they were inappropriate for important inter-regional infrastructure funding worth almost €8 million. They were also ineffective. This project highlights the need for formal arrangements to be put in place to ensure that key decisions are agreed and recorded, and that important issues arising in the course of a project are communicated in a timely way to the relevant bodies.

The Departments did not put in place adequate processes to manage basic project risks arising from the Bytel project, including the risk of failure to deliver the project as planned, and risks arising from changes to the scope of the project. In addition, they did not operate effective controls over validation and authorisation of payment claims, particularly in circumstances in which grant claims were submitted close to payment deadlines.

In general, the arrangements and criteria for funding projects and recoupment of associated EU grant funding are complex. Funding and recoupment can be spread over a number of years. Due to the number of projects and programmes, the multi-annual nature of the funding and the summary nature of the financial reporting by Departments and agencies, it is generally not easy to see in any set of financial statements what has happened when a claim for funding is withdrawn or is disallowed by the EU. For example, the loss to Irish taxpayers of €1.76 million in potential EU funding as a result of the late recognition of problems with the Bytel project was not clearly accounted for by the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources or by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Neither of those Departments reported that the grant of €2.3 million paid to Bytel from Irish Exchequer sources was to no good effect. In my view, it would provide greater transparency if relevant Government Departments and agencies published a note to their accounts setting out, by programme, the value of EU funding requested in a year, the amounts received from the EU, the value of claims withdrawn or disallowed and the balance outstanding at year end. My office will discuss the development of an appropriate format with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Link: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/committees/?id=2015-04-16a.34&s=cross+border#g40>

Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Union Affairs

Summary: Here the committee concluded its series of meetings examining critical issues facing Ireland in the event the United Kingdom withdraws from membership of the European Union. Professor Jennifer Todd briefed the Committee and provided insight into a number of areas of concern expressed by Committee Members.

Professor Jennifer Todd: A British exit of the EU would be very serious. I will focus on two issues. If a British exit threatens the openness of the Border and the functioning of the North-South institutions established under the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, it will affect North-South trade, the funding

of cross-Border projects and peace and stability in the North. Peace and stability in the North are based on the Good Friday Agreement, one pillar of which is North-South relations. It is dangerous to erode any of the pillars of the Good Friday Agreement because it would encourage those with an interest in pulling back on it, either loyalists or dissident republicans, to do so. BrExit would remove the purpose of the Special EU Programmes Body, SEUPB and the North-South bodies established under it, and could undermine the goal and functioning of other North-South bodies.

Peace and stability are also based on the opening up of the Border. The Border is no longer so important in daily life on either side of it and this is part of the root of the relative Nationalist satisfaction in the North. This would change with BrExit due to the implementation of customs etc. BrExit would encourage sovereigntism in the UK and among Unionists. The withdrawal of funding for cross-Border projects would undermine very positive small projects that contribute to peace and reconciliation. There is a need to compensate for potential losses both by negotiating stronger North-South links to the EU for funding purposes, representation and cross-learning, for example, from the Nordic Council. There is a need to proactively put this on the agenda partly because BrExit would be very dangerous and partly because it is only positive to create a momentum of better North-South relations, to reinvigorate the Good Friday process and strengthen peace and stability in the event of the many possible future shocks, BrExit or others.

Dominic Hannigan (Meath East, Labour): Thank you. Many of us are concerned about the issue. I was previously chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and saw the great work done by the cross-Border institutions established under the Good Friday Agreement, such as InterTradeIreland, Waterways Ireland and Foras na Gaeilge. Professor Todd's written submission referred to the deepening levels of engagement between the two parts of the island in other areas, and many of us are members of the North-South Inter-Parliamentary Association that was established a few years ago and whereby Members of the Stormont Assembly meet in plenary session with Members of the Dáil and Seanad. In the forthcoming plenary session, we will discuss the issue Professor Todd raised of improved health links. There are doctors in the North who specialise in deep brain injury and we will discuss how we can ensure people in the South can benefit from this. Here in the South, we are very good at treating congenital heart disease and we are trying to find ways people in the North can get improved access to southern services. Anything that impacts on this relationship is of deep concern to us, as is the Border issue.

The Border issue has been pointed out to us in the past in some of the discussions we have had with other witnesses. From what we are being told, the reasons the UK wants to withdraw converge around two areas, first, the loss of sovereignty to Europe, which a cohort of people feel is a very important issue that merits a BrExit. Second, there is a cohort of people who are less concerned about sovereignty but more concerned about the impact of immigration into the UK. There are two very distinct groups of people on both sides. If Ireland were to remain in the EU and the UK were to leave, a person from Madrid or Paris who wanted to go to the UK could come to Dublin using his or her passport, without a visa, and then travel by bus or train across the Border into the UK without showing his or her passport. If a motivation for the UK to withdraw from the EU is monitoring, limiting and controlling immigration, how would we play our part in it? What would Ireland be asked to do to ensure free access of other EU citizens to the North of Ireland was controlled?

Professor Jennifer Todd: I thank members very much for their excellent questions. I am not sure if I can answer all of them in the way members expect. In terms of immigrants, incomers and freedom of movement across the border, it is the case that immigration is a major concern in the UK. That is something I have thought about but on which I do not have clear answers, except that the Nordic Council set up in 2014 a freedom of movement body which is certainly one that we should look at fairly closely in the event of BrExit. The Nordic Council is one year or two years ahead in terms of thinking about how to organise movement between, for example, Finland and Iceland or Norway and Sweden.

As Senator Hayden said, there are big differences between the Nordic Council and any British-Irish situation, not least because of the imbalance of size and power between Britain and Ireland as opposed to the Nordic countries, but on the other hand the cross-learning is something we can very productively do. I will go through the questions and then perhaps come back to some of the issues.

On Northern Ireland politicians and what they are thinking about all of this, my sense is that they are not thinking about it. I was at a conference in the North not that long ago where the general perspective was that nobody in the North is talking about the issue.

They are not preparing. Maybe they are and they are not telling anyone, but my sense is that there has been less discussion in the North than in the South about it even though it will have a major impact on the North.

While Northern Ireland is stable, it is unstably stable. It is a Nationalist-Unionist dualism. The Good Friday Agreement has achieved a great deal, but the system is still fragile, as we have seen in the past two or three years. As a way of dealing with that fragility, addressing North-South relations constructively and strengthening them within the sovereignty restraints of the Good Friday Agreement can only be positive.

I will revert to a number of the other questions in a moment, but I was asked whether there was any point in doing something or whether I would argue more for proactivity than other witnesses. In terms of North-South relations, it is always important to be proactive. I am not an economist, so I am much less certain about proactivity in terms of the cost to the State of BrExit and the ensuing economic policies. In the context of North-South relations, however, it is clear that the cost to this State of instability in the North would be very high, and proportionately higher than it would be to Britain. The North is one of this State's vital interests. Therefore, we must be proactive in our North-South relations.

As to what could replace North-South or British-Irish institutions in the event of BrExit, how to compensate for North-South contacts and how to counteract this within the UK, what I have tried to outline in my paper is that Northern Ireland has been constitutionally anomalous within the UK since at least 1985 and the Anglo-Irish Agreement, although one could argue that it has been so for even longer. It is understood as such within the UK. Therefore, British Governments are likely to be more open to negotiating flexible relationships between North and South than they might be between Finchley and Dublin. This is something that successive Irish Governments negotiated throughout the 1990s. It could be pushed further, as both the Conservatives and Labour would be open to it in principle. As to what those relationships should be, Mr. Garret FitzGerald commented at one point in the 1980s to the effect that the South could represent Northern farmers at the EU. That remains

more a thinking statement than a policy suggestion. However, there are common interests in the farming community and an openness, albeit at the edges, within Britain to negotiating. For the British state, peace and stability in the North are worth considerable amounts of expenditure and creativity. It is worth considering what creative negotiations can take place on North-South issues, including those relating to the EU, between Britain and Ireland. This should be done at the highest possible level because that is what is required, but other discussions can take place in organisations such as the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, the North-South Ministerial Council and so on. We must start airing the possibility of more innovative relationships in the event of BrExit, but also more generally.

As to what the replacement institutions following BrExit could be, walking backwards in Europe would be a catastrophe, but it would also be a catastrophe if we walked backwards in respect of conflicts. Since 1945, most settlements across the world have failed. Most conflicts do not even end in settlement, but in victory or defeat. We must be particularly careful, as walking backwards on one matter can lead to a more generalised walking backwards.

I was asked whether the State could benefit from BrExit. From the 1950s and 1960s onwards, the State has skilfully balanced relationships with Britain, Europe and the US. If BrExit happens, that is presumably what the State will continue doing. As to how we might benefit from BrExit in terms of our access to the European market, Northern Ireland's access to that market is something about which we cannot do much with Britain, but about which we can do a great deal with the North. We should be thinking along those lines. This does not answer the large questions about the cost to this State of BrExit, but one of the points I was trying to make was that the cost to us and the British of going backwards on the Northern Ireland settlements would be high. As this must be avoided, it is a negotiating point.

As to whether there is any point in us doing anything, the answer is "Yes" in respect of North-South relations and enlivening the Good Friday, peace or settlement process. The metaphor used in the 1990s was of having to keep the momentum going, as otherwise one would fall off the bicycle. In some respects, the momentum has slowed a great deal in recent years. It must resume. It will only slow further if BrExit happens.

We should consider the Nordic model carefully and ask experts to discuss how it might be used. It cannot simply be plonked down and applied uncritically, but it can be discussed.

How to negotiate in respect of immigrants remains a difficult issue, and one for which I do not have a simple answer. Freedom of movement is important. If immigrants are being stopped at the Border, so is everyone else. Border constituencies have benefited from the Good Friday Agreement and the easing of Border controls and customs checking. I have undertaken a great deal of research into everyday life in Border areas. In 2004, people in the Louth area, for example, were still quite distrustful of themselves or of North-South relations.

By 2014, a sense of openness had developed. Everybody to whom we spoke was very positive about that sense of openness. For the first time in their lives the Border did not matter and they were able to speak to people to whom they had never before spoken as they were seen as political opponents. People were very positive about this. Places like Castle Saunderson, the Ulster Canal, the Cavan County Museum and small community groups in the North benefitted from Special European Union

Programmes Body, SEUPB, funding. Small community groups, small museums and so on have a cumulative affect on relationships across the Border and on sectarian relationships. These are areas in which there could be a fall-off in terms of EU funding if Britain exits the EU.

Link: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/committees/?id=2015-04-16a.708&s=cross+border#g711>

21 April 2015

Questions to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

EU Membership

Summary: Here the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade responded to a question regarding the impact of a possible UK exit from the EU. Minister Flanagan advised that “Our joint presence within the Union is also especially beneficial to the people of Northern Ireland and cross-border cooperation. Our focus is therefore on keeping the UK within the EU and we have made this very clear to our British and our European partners, both in public and in private.”

Brendan Smith (Cavan-Monaghan, Fianna Fail): To ask the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if his Department has conducted an assessment of the impact of a possible exit by the United Kingdom from the European Union; if his Department will take an active role in the debate on this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Charles Flanagan (Minister, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Laois-Offaly, Fine Gael): There is little doubt that the UK’s continued membership of the European Union is hugely important for Ireland. There are a number of well-documented reasons for this, not least the key role the EU and the common market play in sustaining the strong British-Irish trading relationship. Our joint presence within the Union is also especially beneficial to the people of Northern Ireland and cross-border cooperation. Our focus is therefore on keeping the UK within the EU and we have made this very clear to our British and our European partners, both in public and in private.

I outlined the Government’s position clearly in a speech to the European Council on Foreign Relations in London last November and I had the opportunity to discuss our views in further detail with my British counterpart, Philip Hammond, at a meeting in Dublin the following month. This Government acknowledges that the UK has some legitimate concerns about the future direction of the EU and we will be open and sympathetic to considering British proposals, if and when they are presented, on improving the functioning of the Union.

It is clear that a British departure from the European Union could have serious and potentially adverse consequences for Ireland. That is why the Government is monitoring developments extremely carefully. The Department of the Taoiseach is leading our work in this area and is coordinating ongoing efforts across Government to ensure that Ireland is best prepared for any scenario that could arise. The Department of Finance is also examining relevant issues and has commissioned a report to improve our understanding of the macro-economic links between the UK and Ireland in the context of our EU membership.

My own Department, given its responsibility for Foreign Affairs and Trade, is naturally closely involved in this process. My officials cooperate closely with other Departments and of course, our Embassy in London also plays a vital role, as do many of our other diplomatic missions across the EU and further afield. There are clearly potential consequences across many areas of my Department's work which require careful consideration.

I should stress, however, that the matter concerned is one for the whole of Government, rather than any one specific Department. This is because British membership of the European Union impacts on Ireland on a large array of levels. This broad interest can be seen, for example, in the Taoiseach's recent address to the CBI in Belfast, and in my colleague Minister Fitzgerald's speech in February to the British Irish Chamber of Commerce in Dublin. We will continue to work closely together within Government to help keep the UK within the EU and to protect our country's interests.