

Check Against Delivery

“British-Irish Relations: Implications of a possible Brexit”

Remarks by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Charlie Flanagan T.D.

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Good afternoon and thank you all for coming.

In preparing my remarks for today, I was reminded of the old joke about the EU. You know the one: the EU heaven where the police are British and the EU hell where the British are the chefs.

The reason I refer to it is not simply to try and raise a smile on a Monday afternoon. It's because the – admittedly unfair – punch-line hinges entirely on the UK.

So if Britain were to leave the EU, the Union's best known – perhaps only – joke doesn't work at all.

But it's not just, of course, hackneyed jokes we have to worry about if the British people decide their future should be outside the EU. We will all have to worry about a whole host of things.

The impact on our economies.

The effect on the British-Irish relationship.

The blow to the EU's international stature and credibility.

The future of the Union itself.

The fact is the prospect of the UK leaving the EU is no laughing matter.

That is certainly the case for my country, for reasons I will shortly explain.

But I'm not just here today to wring my hands about possible problems. I want to talk about how we can help Prime Minister Cameron in achieving a reform package to help firmly secure the UK's future in the Union. I want to describe what we see as some of the main obstacles in the negotiations ahead.

And I want to reflect on our own extensive national experience of referendums. For in my lifetime alone, there have been 38 of them, 24 have taken place while I have been a member of parliament. I have been personally involved in eight polls directly related to the EU. So I've seen – in Ireland at least – how they can be won, and lost.

Allow me to be direct and upfront as well. The approach the Irish Government takes to the debate here is underpinned by one clear conviction: Ireland, the British-Irish relationship, and the EU as a whole are best served by Britain's continuing presence at the heart of the Union. That is why we are so determined to see the UK – our close friend, nearest neighbour and most important business partner – remain in the EU alongside us.

Let's start though with a very quick assessment of where we are and what lies ahead.

Prime Minister Cameron was re-elected in May with a mandate to seek an EU reform package and hold an in-out referendum. That is something that everyone in the EU accepts and respects.

The Prime Minister and his colleagues have already made significant efforts with all their EU partners, including Ireland, to explain their ideas. The commitment they have shown to connect with other Member States is as commendable as it is wise – we know from experience how important it is to engage directly with European capitals on sensitive EU issues. Through these diplomatic efforts, we all now have a better sense of what the UK hopes to achieve, though we wait to hear more details and formal proposals have yet to be tabled.

Our Heads of State or Government collectively heard from the Prime Minister at the June European Council. Exploratory, technical-level talks have been underway in Brussels since then. And we look forward to hearing, later in the autumn, how those discussions have progressed, before the European Council considers the matter again in more detail.

What we all want, and what we all need, is a calm, reasoned and deliberative process that can both satisfy the UK's concerns and serve as a basis for its continued membership. So far, that is what we have been seeing at EU level. So things are hopefully moving in the right direction.

The truth of the matter is that a sense of trepidation persists – both in Ireland and across the EU – about what could yet unfold. The stakes – for Europe, for its people, for its economies – are simply too high; the potential problems too big.

That is certainly the case in Ireland, where the EU-UK relationship features very prominently in our political and commercial discourse - and where our Government is already working to develop the clearest understanding of the complex issues of concern. The fact is that – bar the UK itself – we have more at stake than anyone else. Let me briefly recall some of the reasons why.

For a start, the UK is our biggest trading partner: we exchange €1 billion of goods and services every week. Credit for this lies, in the first instance, with Irish and British businesses, who work so hard to build and sustain commercial ties across the Irish Sea. But common Irish and British membership of the EU's single market has been instrumental too in bringing our economies so close together and creating jobs and wealth.

It has provided, in essence, a dynamic framework that underpins our successful trading relationship. That is why so many businesses are so vocal about the benefits of British membership of the Union. And it is why we should all be so wary of the uncertainty that would inevitably accompany any change in the nature of the UK's relationship with the EU.

Membership of the EU has also brought the UK and Ireland – the EU's two English-speaking members, who joined on the same day – closer in other important ways. Working together, side-by-side, within the EU has nurtured ties between our respective administrations and political systems. It has also helped us grasp that we have more in common with one another than with any other Member State. I have no doubt this has played a key role in the now flourishing British-Irish relationship.

Tomorrow, in Belfast, the UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I will bring together the five main parties in Northern Ireland for an intensive round of talks aimed at stabilising the political institutions in Stormont. It is perhaps in Northern Ireland where the EU's positive influence has been most keenly felt. From the outset, our joint membership has facilitated progress with the peace process. It has served as a forum for contact across policy issues and a separate setting to address problems as they arose. And as the Taoiseach said at the weekend, the EU has fulfilled an intangible role as a wider union in which we are all members. None of us in the UK and Ireland should forget the stability this has brought and continues to bring.

The economic impact of EU membership on Northern Ireland should not be forgotten either. The EU has both financed reconciliation programmes and fuelled growth and employment. Its structural funding has helped to develop a modern economy with first class infrastructure. And its common market has been a huge benefit for Northern Irish exporters and businesses, by both helping to attract foreign investment to its shores and better connecting them with customers further afield.

In short, the EU has been a powerful – if understated – force for good for everyone and every community right across Northern Ireland.

All this may help explain why British EU membership really matters to Ireland, to the British-Irish relationship, and to our own national interest.

Which, quite frankly, puts us in a difficult position. Because as important as we consider British membership to be, the decision whether the UK remains or leaves is purely for people here to decide.

We cannot interfere in the affairs of our friend and neighbour. We cannot be insensitive to the democratic process underway in the UK. We cannot afford to upset the wonderful dynamic that is the modern British-Irish relationship.

And yet. There is no denying that Ireland still occupies a unique position when it comes to this. We are the only State with which you share a land border. We are the only other EU country that speaks English as a native tongue. We are one of only three member states whose residents in the UK will be able to vote in the referendum.

So it is no surprise that every element of Irish society – its people, its businesses, its Diaspora – is anxious that Ireland's interests are best protected when it comes to the EU-UK debate. And that is why we have resolved, despite being respectful of the democratic process here, to make our voices heard in this debate.

That means – speaking openly and honestly – that Ireland must find a way to play a constructive role in the debate. A role that is supportive of the UK, our most important strategic partner, in helping it to achieve reasonable reform objectives. But a role that is equally respectful of the interests of our 26 other friends and partners within the European Union. Because irrespective of the emphasis we place on continued British EU membership, we will not jeopardise our own position in the Union. In all circumstances, Ireland's future lies within the EU

How can this balance be achieved?

Well, I would first argue that the balance isn't in some respects as delicate as it might first appear. That's because the interests of the UK and of the other Member States are far from mutually exclusive when it comes to the reform agenda. Yes, there are likely to be differences of opinion on certain contentious issues. But many EU partners, in fact, want the very same things as the UK across a range of areas, especially when it comes to economic policy. This reality makes the task of its friends, thankfully, a little easier.

So our focus is on working together in pursuit of common EU policy and reform objectives. This includes areas that we know are of key importance to the UK, whether it's creating a real digital single market, the finalisation of trade agreements or lessening the regulatory burden for our businesses.

We will be open-minded too on other issues. We know, for example, that the UK is likely to suggest proposals to improve how the Union operates. The detail of what may be proposed will be important and will need to be achievable. But I can promise that our instinct is to be sympathetic. It is already clear that many other EU partners will take a similar approach.

After all, we all want to see our Union work more effectively and we all want to see the UK remain in the EU.

Now, potential changes to welfare provisions in the UK could prove more difficult. That's because the very perception – whether it's right or wrong – of the citizens of one Member State being treated differently from another touches a nerve deep within the EU's common ethos. This is why it could prove a tough hurdle to overcome, depending upon how it's approached.

We know the scale of migration into the UK, including from other EU member States, is a source of serious concern, both for the Government and many British people. We have heard the debate about the pressures on public services. And we have seen it said that these pressures are becoming unsustainable and excessive; that some local communities in the UK are struggling to cope; and that this is contributing to a sense of dissatisfaction with the EU and Britain's place in it.

We know these concerns are often honestly held. And we all appreciate and share the Prime Minister's commitment, despite the intensity of this debate, to protecting and supporting freedom of movement. It is very important that he has made clear that a basic building block of the Union is not being called into question.

Part of the problem, as I see it, is simply the UK's sheer success within the Union. EU nationals come to the UK to work, to develop professionally, to contribute to society. They do that here, because of the English language, a growing economy and a flexible labour market. Because the UK is an exciting and vibrant place in which to live. And because there are opportunities that are not available in some other parts of the Union.

But the key point is that in general EU migrants move to other countries, including the UK and Ireland, to work hard. To find opportunities to better themselves and their families. And in some cases to do jobs that our employers can find difficult to fill.

Do some come in search of welfare handouts? Maybe a small minority do, but the vast majority come to work.

Of course, abuses of freedom of movement should be addressed. To do otherwise would risk weakening the principle and popular support for it. That's why we are prepared to consider proposals here on their merits.

We need to be careful though, across the EU, not to tar honest jobseekers with any welfare-tourism brush. That would be a grave disservice to those whose only motivation is making a better life for themselves and their families. And it would unnecessarily complicate our collective efforts to prevent genuine abuses where they occur.

Leaving aside the issue of abuse, it may be that there are aspects of the UK's welfare system and labour market which make it more attractive to genuine job-seekers than other destinations. This is a highly complex question. Maybe as a matter of policy the UK will decide to make changes. But these will have to be applied fairly.

One final point about this. We must be vigilant about the potential for the debate on EU freedom of movement to be conflated with the humanitarian and refugee crisis on Europe's shores and in its near neighbourhood.

And I would emphasize that the two issues are separate and distinct, even if they both reflect the increasingly globalised and inter-connected world in which we live.

The enormity of the wider refugee crisis is not merely sobering, but harrowing. But we can't allow our societies to become unnerved by its scale. We in the EU should instead face it head on, shoulder to shoulder. A comprehensive solution, that addresses both the "push" and "pull" factors, will require patience and commitment. This is where British leadership could prove invaluable, given the UK's global reach, its development network and its capacity to wield and exert influence.

But to return to the upcoming referendum itself:

Now, none of us here knows the exact date of the poll. But we all know the question, indeed, the precise wording of that question is being considered by Parliament today. We certainly know the scale of what's at stake.

We in Ireland hold something of a record when it comes to referendums on Europe. We know the circumstances of each were unique to us, just as your poll will be particular to the UK. And we realise that what might work in one body politic could yet utterly fail in another. But it might still prove helpful to reflect on our own campaign experiences as your own referendum begins to appear in the horizon.

In Ireland, when campaigning on European referendums, many of them relating to voluminous and complex Treaties, we had to stay focused on the big picture. We learned that most people spend very little time thinking about the EU and, quite understandably, they are not often enthusiastic about engaging with dense legal tracts, even if they may excite some of us in this room today. In such circumstances, it can be useful to begin with the context and the principles that underpinned what has become the European Union at its foundation. When we think of a continent torn apart by regular wars and contrast that with Europe today – we can see how much the EU has already contributed and how it will continue to contribute to peace, democracy and mutual understanding across Europe. I sincerely believe that we must not be complacent about the positive transformational effects the EU has delivered for the peoples of Europe. However, referendums on the EU

are less about what came before and more about what lies ahead. The EU's capacity to help deliver stability and prosperity in the future – of which I am convinced – must surely be one of its main selling points.

We know though from experience that it can be challenging to explain the benefits of the EU, whether it's a new treaty or membership itself. In today's busy world, in an era of Twitter, Snapchat and Facebook, how can one communicate the benefits of something as broad and deep as the EU? Those who feel positively about the EU often take for granted that membership is widely accepted as a good thing. It can be difficult to get people fired up, to convince them to engage, and sometimes even to vote. But it is crucial that every effort is made to engage in debate, to provide information, to clarify, to explain.... Analyses of the outcome following the defeat of the first referendums on the Nice and Lisbon Treaties in Ireland revealed that many people voted 'No' because they felt they had insufficient facts. Some opponents of the Treaties had adopted a clever soundbite "If you don't know, vote no".

"If you don't know, vote no" is a phrase that has often been bane of my life when I am on a doorstep arguing for change and for the endorsement of a new EU Treaty. What I've learned from this and what may be interesting in a UK context, is that voters can often be cautious when it comes to change. To use another expression, they may decide it's "better the devil you know than the devil you don't". The Union has its flaws and limitations but it is true to say that a departure from the EU would be a leap into the unknown. That's not scare tactics – it's a statement of fact.

There is always a risk too that EU referendum campaigns become inextricably associated with the "establishment". Business and – we hope – the main political parties here may be powerful champions a vote to remain in the EU. But voters should also hear as well from different voices and new faces. Achievers in other fields whom people respect and can relate to. In our referendums the electorate, quite rightly, wanted to hear from a range of sources, including civic society groups. They wanted to hear from people they felt they could trust when it came to big EU questions. For some that might be a respected lawyer, for others it might be a well known television personality – essentially, my point is that engagement in the debate needs to go beyond the usual suspects.

The Irish EU referendum campaigns were also colourful at times, divisive at others. The claims and counterclaims didn't always add up. The pro-EU side has, in the past, been somewhat blindsided by spurious claims, for example, that a yes vote would mean conscription into a vast European army or the introduction of euthanasia or that the EU courts would cut the Irish minimum wage. Big attention grabbing claims on posters certainly caught the public's imagination in a way that the sober and sensible 'Yes side' found hard to compete with. We have learned that one needs to move fast to rebut

baseless arguments. Because once the terms of our debates became skewed, we struggled to maintain our grip on the argument. And the winners were always the ones who framed the debate early, and owned it throughout.

To conclude on referendum campaigns:

Fundamentally, I believe a referendum provides an important opportunity for voters to engage in vital issues of public policy and to make positive decisions about the future direction of their country. In Ireland, referendums have helped our voters to become better informed on European issues and the challenges and opportunities of EU membership. I hope that the forthcoming referendum in the UK will be an enriching experience for the people of this country and that it will deepen British engagement in the EU in the years and decades ahead.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen,

Plenty of work lies ahead, whether it's the negotiations in Brussels and EU capitals, or the referendum that will follow thereafter.

But securing an outcome that will allow for the UK's continued and strengthened presence in the EU is achievable. And I think others across the Union also believe the right balances can be struck.

You know where we stand, if you didn't before. We want the UK in the EU – and it's not just to avoid us being substituted for you in EU jokes and having our also-excellent chefs unfairly lampooned.

No, we want the UK in the EU because our Union is stronger on account of Britain's presence. Because Ireland and our society, businesses and citizens benefit from the UK's membership. And because it reinforces and enriches the remarkably deep bond between our two countries and peoples.

The referendum – no matter what unfolds – will mark a crossroads for the UK and its people. There is though much road to travel before that happens. We in Ireland can't steer the debate along the way but, as Britain's great friend and partner within the EU, we will do all we can to help you remain part of it.

Thank you.

ENDS