

## Ambassadors

I am very pleased to welcome you to Iveagh House today. I hope we can have a free-flowing and open conversation about Brexit. But I thought it would first be useful to set out some key issues as I see them.

Before I do so, may I say that I appreciate very much the role you are all playing in keeping your capitals well-briefed on Ireland's views. I am sure that the context for the very positive discussions I have had and am having with all of your Ministers owes a great deal to your analysis.

We now have a better idea of how the United Kingdom is going to approach the forthcoming negotiations. Many of us have been calling for clarification of British objectives for some time, so the Prime Minister's speech on Tuesday was welcome in that regard. And she has confirmed that the Article 50 process will begin by the end of March. After months of speculation, we will soon be able to get down to business.

Once the Prime Minister has invoked Article 50, it will be for the EU side to take the steps set out in that Article. We agreed practical arrangements in December which confirm the lead political role of the European Council and the regular involvement of the General Affairs Council and Coreper.

Therefore, the views and wishes of the Member States will be decisive. And the negotiating guidelines and mandate can be reviewed and adjusted as need be. But the need for the Commission team, led by Michel Barnier, to be an effective chief negotiator is also underscored. It will also be vital to respect the role of the European Parliament for many reasons, not least of which is that an EU-UK agreement will require its consent. All of the Institutions must work constructively together.

Process is important. But attitudes and atmosphere are more important. I welcome the British Prime Minister's assurance that the UK wishes to have a close and friendly relationship with the Union, and wants an orderly process. If the UK takes a constructive and pragmatic approach in setting its goals and conducting the negotiations it should be met with a similar approach from the EU side. It is manifestly in the interests of both the EU and the UK that Brexit be managed sensibly, and that the future relationship between us be close and mutually beneficial.

Continuing emphasis on the downsides and risks of failure, or imagining a future of rivalry, will not build goodwill as effectively as demonstrating a steely determination to succeed.

The United Kingdom, as the Union's neighbour, will continue to be a major trading partner and an essential ally in the fight against crime and terrorism. Equally, the European Union will continue to be the number one destination for British exports, and to share with it the same broad values and concerns in a turbulent and uncertain world. Each of us will benefit from the other being successful, outward looking, and a defender of liberal democracy.

Achieving this broad objective will be difficult and complex. There are clear potential pitfalls. There must be clarity and agreement on the terms of Britain's departure from the Union. Linked to this will be discussion of a shared political understanding of the framework for our future relationship.

The connection between these two sets of negotiations must be worked out. It is also very likely that some sort of transitional arrangements, or implementation period, will be required, but what kind of arrangements? How long might they last? How would they be governed and structured? Then the negotiation of a fully detailed trade agreement will be highly complex, and the details of such agreements are always devilish.

We will therefore have:

1. The withdrawal process;
2. The new UK-EU relationship;
3. The in-between.

There is a tendency to think only of the future trade and economic relationship, but there are many other difficult issues to address, such as fisheries, civil aviation, energy, agriculture, possible British participation in EU programmes and so forth. And that is without addressing the issues of dispute resolution, budget contributions, migration, and the free movement of people.

There will not be much time to reach the exit agreement under Article 50 – less than two years in practice. And it is easy to imagine how difficult political forces and some media voices could make the negotiations. So reaching agreement is far from guaranteed.

Some in the UK believe that there is a desire on the EU side to punish them as a result of a democratic decision to leave. This is just not true. I am sure that everyone wants a fair and balanced outcome. Partnership between us is in everyone's interests. Equally, whether the UK makes a success of its new status will depend mainly on its own decisions and efforts over time.

But, especially at a time when the Union itself is under strain, it would be unreasonable for any country to expect to enjoy the rights and benefits of membership without the duties and obligations. I'm not a great golfer, but I know full well that if I chose to resign from my golf club I could not expect to turn up the next day and play for free, and enjoy all the clubhouse benefits and privileges.

And while the Union is about much more than a narrow calculation of national gains and losses, it must be the case that membership is more advantageous than any kind of external relationship. The principle of a balance of rights and obligations is fundamental for us on the EU side. What that will mean, especially for a country outside the Single Market and Customs Union, will be at the heart of the negotiations.

But we need to start in a positive and determined frame of mind.

Let me be very clear about Ireland's approach.

We have more to lose than any other country from failure to agree, and more to gain from success. But we know that this can best be achieved, not by rhetoric, but by continuing to be a loyal and constructive member of the EU team – and ensuring that our partners understand our approach and perspectives.

A member whose views carry weight because of the strength of our relationship with the UK, but also because the strength of our commitment to the EU. A member whose input is well-informed and constructive and whose negotiating skills and excellent relations with our closest neighbour are helpful.

In the negotiations, Ireland will have many of the same interests as others – in particular trade and economic – but as you know very well, we have unique and specific concerns in regard to the Good Friday Agreement and the Peace Process, the Common Travel Area, the border and North/South co-operation. I do not need to spell these out once again.

However, I want to repeat that the Government is pleased and encouraged at the extent to which these concerns are understood and appreciated by our partners, and by the universal desire to assist in addressing them satisfactorily. Commissioner Barnier's clear statement in December that Irish issues would be a negotiating priority was very positive.

I also very much welcome the clear commitment of the British Government, as repeated by the Prime Minister on Tuesday. We are talking to the UK and working closely with the Commission and Council Secretariat to develop concrete solutions, and to work out how they can be achieved in the negotiations. Of course, the overall context will be determined by the broader EU-UK agreement – another reason for us to seek the best possible outcome.

The current political crisis in Northern Ireland, and the forthcoming Assembly elections, have of course complicated the task of agreeing common North/South objectives, certainly in the coming weeks and possibly months. In the context of this temporary hiatus, the continuation of the all-island Civic Dialogue assumes a particular significance. Sectoral meetings addressing specific themes are under way and the second plenary takes place on 17 February.

The onset of the current political crisis in Stormont has demonstrated that the Northern Ireland settlement remains fragile, and indeed underlines the case we have been making that Brexit must not damage the Good Friday Agreement.

I was in Belfast yesterday with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and we agreed to keep in contact and work together during the election period.

The work done to date in the North/South Ministerial Council on shared priorities has demonstrated a considerable degree of emerging consensus between Dublin and Belfast. I very much hope that a hotly contested election will not damage that consensus. Both communities in Northern Ireland can be assured that the Irish Government will be fair and determined in working for the best possible outcome – what works best for Northern Ireland will also work best for us.

In parallel with the Brexit negotiations, the work of the European Union will carry on. There is a great deal to be done. Many weighty issues are on the table. They include the deepening of the Single Market, trade negotiations -though I regret the standstill on TTIP - the creation of a digital single market, more effective action against terrorism, meeting the multifaceted challenge of migration, future co-operation within the Treaty on security and defence.

There is the continuing need, still acute in many countries, to achieve sustainable economic growth, financial stability and jobs. And I do not need to tell you that we are living in uncertain and challenging times, in which European solidarity in support of our interests in values is more important than ever.

Making progress on these issues is important in itself. But it also is really important that citizens see that the Union makes a tangible difference and realise that the seductive rhetoric of populists is hollow.

This requires better communication, through all the channels now available, which points to the achievements of the EU and its relevance at this dangerous time in the world. The stability and certainty provided by the EU may not be headline grabbing but they are essential to the quality of life of the EU's citizens. Strong political leadership which avoids blame games and takes decisions is vital.

The EU as a complex, broad and deep Union so often struggles to effectively communicate both its big picture projects and the myriad small improvements it makes to people's lives. But we simply have to become far better at communicating and connecting on the value of EU membership.

All Member States agree that now is not the time for grand gestures or bold new institutional or Treaty initiatives. That makes strong and continued delivery on current priorities all the more important. It is essential that the Bratislava Process concludes in Rome in March with more than a simple repetition of existing commitments.

We need a convincing narrative, based on solid achievements, that the Union is continuing to make important progress.

No political entity or international organisation is perfect. The European Union is inevitably complicated and often hard to understand – making it an obvious target for simplistic populists of all stripes. The economic and migration crises have both put it under real strain. Its self-confidence has been buffeted. But Ireland is fully committed to the European Union. It should

not be necessary to say this. But in recent times some commentators have argued that we should consider following the British example.

Debate is always healthy and there can be no taboos. But the arguments we have heard are flimsy and misconceived.

The suggestion that the UK is Ireland's only partner within the Union is simply untrue. Yes, we have often, but not always, worked with the UK. Its liberal outlook and its negotiating weight will certainly be missed. Co-operation with British colleagues comes easily to us. But over the last forty-four years Ireland has built excellent relations with all other Member States.

All of you know that there are many issues of importance to all of your countries on which we have made common cause. We are determined to build on these partnerships and develop even further the excellent relations we already have. That will be a matter of the highest priority for my Department, for our mission network, and for Government as a whole over the years ahead.

The Irish economy depends enormously on our membership of the Single Market and of the Customs Union. This is true both for inward investors and indigenous companies. It is simply inconceivable that we would have been remotely as successful outside the Union. The volume of Irish exports to the twenty-six other Member States of the Union is now more than twice that to Britain.

The consequence of leaving the European Union would inevitably be a return to a greater dependence on the UK and, effectively, a return to the sterling area – without any of the input we have around the European table. This would reverse the trend of the past forty years and the great strides we have made in diversifying our economic and political relationships. It would surely be politically inconceivable in a period when we are marking the centenary of our passage to independence.

This is not to deny the very great continuing importance of the British market, and of course our most positive relationship with the UK. That will continue. It is why a close relationship between the EU and the UK, which places the minimum possible barriers to continuing trade, is a key objective.

But we also recognise the importance of the continued diversification of our export markets, especially for our indigenous companies. This has been a long-term strategy, but work on delivering it needs to be intensified. This is a priority for our State Agencies, our Embassies, and the whole of government, including my own Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

I chair the Export Trade Council which brings together all relevant Departments and agencies, and private sector representatives, and mitigating the effects of Brexit in the short, medium and long term is at the top of the agenda. The implementation of new cross-sectoral whole of

government strategies for Asia-Pacific and the Americas is a key challenge for me and my Department but one we are embracing with gusto.

The arguments are not just economic. Our own experience of conflict on this island gives us a particular appreciation of the value of peace. I do not believe that the Irish people would wish to withdraw from the most successful peace project in European history, and severely damage our capacity to work with like-minded countries to promote our values and protect our interests. Being a member of the European Union gives us an influence and a perspective we could never otherwise have.

Finally, logic points to a future EU-UK relationship which will be mutually beneficial. It will not be easy to achieve, and the road ahead may be bumpy. But with goodwill and common sense I believe it is probable.

The UK will remain our closest neighbour, and the European Union will remain our political and economic home.

I consider myself a proud European and I am delighted to have this opportunity to engage with you today.

Thank you.