

*Check Against Delivery*

**Keynote Address by Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Simon Coveney T.D., to Eurofound Foundation Forum 2017 Dublin Castle Conference Centre Tuesday, 14 November 2017**

Mr Menendez-Valdes, Distinguished Guests, Esteemed panellists, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I'm delighted to be here with you this afternoon for your Foundation Forum 2017. And I'm grateful to Ministerial colleagues from Sweden, the Czech Republic and Slovenia for making the time to visit Dublin too. It's only Danish visitors today that I hope go home unhappy – and for this visit, and tonight's match, only!

It's great to see a 50-50 gender balance of speakers here as well. We need considerably more women at the very top levels of decision-making in politics, business and government. This is a priority for me and for the diplomatic and foreign service I oversee. We all stand to gain from leadership which better reflects the societies we serve.

I note that the purpose of this year's Forum is to look at various perspectives on the theme of convergence in Europe, with a particular focus, bearing in mind Eurofound's mandate, on upward convergence in living and working conditions, including employment.

Indeed, it's very timely that the Forum this year takes place just two days before the Social Summit, where our Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, along with EU Heads of State or Government will gather in Gothenburg, Sweden to discuss fair jobs and growth, and to adopt the formal proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Ireland's links with Eurofound go beyond that of a mere host country. As Social Affairs Commissioner from 1973 to 1976, Dr Patrick Hillery, was instrumental in securing agreement to the Social Action Plan in 1973 which led to the establishment of Eurofound. It would have been with great satisfaction that he formally opened Eurofound's premises in Loughlinstown as President of Ireland in 1978.

Since its foundation in 1975, Eurofound, with its approximately one hundred staff – small by the standard of EU agencies and offices – continues to punch well above its weight. Eurofound's first Director stated that Eurofound "must select its objectives with care" given its finite resources. This guiding principle has served Eurofound well, allowing it to develop, under its current leadership, a very specific expertise, ensuring its authoritative voice is listened to by those who make employment and social policy – indeed many of you here today.

Eurofound's work on key issues such as the gender pay gap, the future of work and an ageing workforce continue to guarantee its relevance amongst policymakers. And Eurofound's commitment to evidence-based policy-making has made a real difference to the lives of EU citizens.

We need plenty of evidence-based policy-making now as we turn our minds to Brexit. The evidence of what we've seen in recent months has not always been encouraging.

On Irish issues, the Government's position and priorities have been clear for a long time. We want to protect the peace process, including by avoiding a hard border on this island. We want to maintain the Common Travel Area with Britain, protect North-South cooperation, and safeguard the EU citizenship and other rights of people in Northern Ireland.

More broadly, we want a transition phase for Brexit that preserves the status quo in terms of membership of the Single Market and Customs Union and that is as long as is necessary for an orderly Brexit. In my view, this could mean a transition period of up to 4 or 5 years.

We are at a critical juncture now, with only a month left to make sufficient progress on a number of issues – a financial settlement, citizens' rights and Irish issues - before December's European Council. This progress will be necessary before the talks can move to their second phase and discussions on the EU and UK's future relationship.

So, where are we on those Irish issues? In a nutshell, we have made very good progress on the Common Travel Area, which has been in operation since long before Ireland and the UK joined the European Union. On North-South cooperation and citizenship and other rights for Irish and EU citizens in Northern Ireland, an extensive mapping exercise is underway. But there is still a considerable way to go with this work. We need to ensure the Good Friday Agreement, the international agreement that acts as a guiding star for peace and reconciliation on this island, is allowed to deliver to full effect as part of whatever Withdrawal Agreement and future relationship is negotiated.

It is the border however – more than 300 miles long with almost 300 crossing points – which remains the most challenging issue by far. All interested parties – the EU Task Force, the UK government and, of course, the Irish government – have said there can be no re-imposition of any meaningful border on this island. But rhetoric also has to match realities. And it is in this regard that the competing and even contradictory aspirations of the UK government have presented difficulties for us.

The Government in London has repeatedly outlined 3 ambitions which simply cannot all be delivered. These are, firstly, that the UK leaves the Single Market and Customs Union; secondly, that all parts of the UK jump together, so to speak; and thirdly, that they want no return to any hard or visible border on this island. Well, we fully share that final objective, which, to be blunt, is the most important – it's the bedrock for peace and stability on this island. We just don't see, and the EU doesn't see, how it is compatible with the other two ambitions.

This is why we have consistently called for the UK as a whole to stay in the Single Market and Customs Union, or something very similar – we think that is in the interests of both peace and prosperity across these islands. We also do not see why anyone should leave the world's largest free trade area – and more than 50 trade agreements around the world – in pursuit of free trade.

Failing that however - and in order to ensure that peace on this island can be sustained, that North-South cooperation can continue and that our all-island economy can continue to grow – we will need unique solutions for Northern Ireland.

This is to prevent the emergence of any regulatory divergence which could necessitate a border. And as it is Britain which is opting to leave the Union and to create this rupture, we are awaiting serious British proposals in this respect.

Once we get to phase two of these talks, and discussions on the future EU-UK relationship, our neighbours will have no greater friends than the Irish government. I've looked more than one UK Cabinet Minister in the eye in London or Dublin to assure them of this. And that is because we want essentially the same thing – a trading relationship as close as possible to the status quo. Irish-UK trade exceeds €1 billion each week and we want that to continue. 200,000 jobs in this country, and another 200,000 in the UK, depend upon it.

At the same time, it is important to note that the rest of the EU accounts for 35 per cent of Ireland's exports, more than double our exports to the UK. Staying at the heart of the EU, with unfettered access for businesses in Ireland to the Single Market, is therefore central to our economic future. That future is in Europe, beyond any doubt – there is zero chance of us following the road our British friends have chosen. And that is also why we are determined to play our part, and have our voice heard, in the crucial new debate on the future of our continent.

To that end, I will be joining the Taoiseach in Trinity College Dublin tomorrow morning for the public launch of a Citizens' Dialogue on the Future of Europe. This will mark the formal start of a process designed to engage the Irish public directly in a debate on the kind of Europe they want to see evolving.

Our aim is to raise awareness of the issues involved; to encourage participation in the debate; and to use this engagement process to formulate Ireland's contribution to the wider European debate.

For the Government, our starting point is to focus on the needs of our own people. And this includes a focus on jobs and growth, opportunities for our young people, completion of the single market and the key role of the EU in meeting many of the key challenges facing us, including climate change and violent extremism.

I believe that what we need now is an honest and fair debate; one that confronts the myths about the European Union and one that is calm, considered and inclusive. This is how we will best formulate a contribution that reflects the concerns and expectations of the Irish people.

Eurofound, and all of you, have a vital role to play in shaping that future too. I wish you every success with this Forum and I wish you continued success in all aspects of your work long into the future.

Thank you for welcoming me here today.