

Ceann Comhairle,

Cathaoirleach, Kahoar

Chairs and members of the Joint Committees on European Affairs, Foreign Affairs and Trade and Defence, of the Joint Committee in relation to the negotiations under Article 50 of the Treaty of the European Union,

It is a honour for me to be here today and address you here in this historic Dail chamber. I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you here today.

Dear colleagues, I am here to deliver a message of solidarity. Of solidarity with the Irish citizens, with the Irish people. We will never allow Ireland to suffer by the British decision to leave the EU. That is a firm commitment from myself and the European Parliament. And also one from the European Union as a whole.

Next year, it will be exactly twenty years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Good Friday Agreement is not a practical arrangement on passports, on borders, on customs, on tariffs. It is an agreement about peace. It is about the reconciliation of divided communities. About rebuilding confidence. Rebuilding trust.

And it is also a successful innovation on citizenship itself. Personally, I find that the most important sentence in the agreement reads as follows: *“It is the birth right of all the people in Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may choose”*.

*“As they may choose”* a few simple words that go against the outdated version of some nation states that don't like ambiguity, contingency and multiplicity. Four simple words that give power to the people. To individual citizens. Not to states. To choose their own destiny. Four simple words that have brought stability to Northern Ireland. Peace and stability based on openness, on common understanding. Understanding of the fact that identities are multi-layered and complex. That identities should bring people together and not di-

vide them. Four simple words that not only define Northern Ireland, but Ireland as a whole.

Some British politicians (not to name Boris Johnson) criticize their country men and women for wanting to keep their European identity. He accuse them of “split allegiance”. I think, this is a binary, old-fashioned and reductionist understanding of identity. I think we need to be smarter, more open and more inventive than that.

It's not your origin or the fact that by accident you were born in this or that village, city or country that makes you a good citizen. No, it is the fact that you embrace the values of your community, that you cherish the fundamental rights and freedoms of the society in which you live. Values, rights and freedoms that are common in our European Union, in all nations, in every one of our member states. It's nonsense to talk about “split allegiance”. It's perfectly possible to feel English, British and European at the same time. As it is perfectly normal to be a Dubliner, Irish and European at the same time without being schizophrenic.

It's this vision that needs to be defended by our European Union. Just as the Union needs to defend that there is no return anymore to hard borders on our continent. And certainly not to a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. A point we made very clear in the European Parliament's resolution we adopted on the 5 April 2017. Am I mistaking, when I state that the Irish border is in no way a natural one? It is not a river, it is not a mountain ridge. It meanders for 310 miles through meadows and forests and farmland. It cannot be securely policed and is therefore an illogical divide; one that at least should remain invisible, just as it is today.

Yesterday, I spent the afternoon visiting the border area in County Monaghan and meeting people who live and work there. At one point, I stood astride the border. One foot was in Northern Ireland, my other foot stood in the Republic. But it was completely impossible to see when one jurisdiction ended and the other started. The cows especially couldn't see it. Cows from the North, eating grass from the south, milked in the north by a farmer from the south, with their milk bottled in the south. I am Belgian so surrealism comes naturally to me. But to reinstate a border would be more than surreal - it would be totally absurd - even for me.

There are borders and there are borders. They can be lines on the maps, they can be physical barriers. Worst of all, borders can run through people's hearts and minds. These are the worst kind because they breed division, discrimination and hostility. The history of Europe is in many ways a history of borders. Over the centuries, our continent has seen borders shift, borders disappear and borders reappear. Being a liberal, my natural inclination is to be against borders. Borders, it seems to me, are best when they are just lines on maps. And reducing borders to lines on maps is in many ways what the European Union is all about. And this is certainly the case for Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

This border created chaos, hate and violence. So to reduce this to a line on a map was a crucial achievement twenty years ago, an achievement in which the European Union, the UK and Ireland played a decisive role. The results I saw for myself yesterday. Whether one is speaking about the economy, commerce, agriculture, health and other social services, the border is featuring less and less as a factor in the economic and social life. And that is precisely its greatest achievement. It is a border that does not divide people but enables them to live together in peace. It is a border that is not divisive, that does not run through people's hearts, but that does the opposite: it creates a common purpose.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You know better than I, that Ireland underwent a dramatic transformation the last three decades. Economically, but also socially. It was a country defined by Catholicism and nationalism. In 1973, the birth year of the current Prime Minister, only 7% of Irish were born abroad. Today, that number is 17 per cent, which makes Ireland 'very-diverse' to European standards.

The Irish economy has successfully integrated migrants from all over the world, from Poland to Nigeria. Ireland is the home of international IT giants, it is an example of constructive and fair globalization.

Ireland is no longer a nation of emigration. It is a country of destination. And it owes that to more than just its economic transformation.

Ireland has gained a lot of self-confidence over the last decades, and rightly so. You should cherish that; we as a Union do cherish it. Because let us nev-

er forget that Europe is much more than the cooperation between two old enemies, like France and Germany. Today Europe goes beyond Franco-German relationship. We need all hands on deck. All 27 are needed to make Europe work. Europe wouldn't be half of what it is today without dynamic countries like Ireland, countries that have dealt with complex border- and identity issues like Ireland, countries that were able to reinvent themselves with respect for tradition ... like Ireland.

Ireland is crucial to the Union. The Irish border and all things related, are a priority in the negotiations. We will repeat this in a new resolution that we will adopt in early October. And in this we will state that Ireland must not pay the price of Brexit. Or that Ireland - or any other member - will be used as a bargaining chip in the negotiations. The interests of Ireland are part and parcel of the interests of the EU27. The Irish position is the European position. The European position is the Irish position.

In this joint position, let me make one last thing very clear : The reemergence of the border question between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic has not been caused by you, neither by the rest of the European Union. It's the inevitable consequence of the choice of Great-Britain to leave the European Union. So, the resolution of this border issue is entirely the responsibility of the United Kingdom. It is for them to come up with a workable solution. One which safeguards the Good Friday Agreement, preserve the Common Travel Area, avoids a hardening of the border and, last but not least, doesn't compromise the Irish membership and the integrity of the single market and the customs union.

In my opinion this can only be a unique solution. And most of the people I've met yesterday - from both sides of the border - believe that this unique solution requires that one way or another, Northern Ireland should remain part of the custom union and the single market. I know that in their paper on Ireland/Northern Ireland the UK government has rejected this. Fair enough. But then the UK has to come forward with another proposal that avoids any disruption. Simply saying that the problem will be solved by using new technology is in my opinion unconvincing.

Dear colleagues,

I'm pleased to say that the Irish MEPs, some of whom are here today, are working very hard to defend all of this. A position that is shared right across the Parliament. We know that the Irish people have made the choice to be a core Member State of the EU and because of this we will never let them down. Just as we need also your help to reform Europe. Because that is something we urgently need to do as well.

Brexit is also the ideal moment to reflect on the future of the Union where we all belong to. There are enough big challenges ahead, challenges that transcend national borders. From climate change, to international terrorism to our remaining economic difficulties. These are issues individual countries cannot tackle on their own. But currently, Europe is too weak as well to take on these challenges. In order for us to beat international terrorism, we need a European FBI. To overcome the economic crisis we need a banking union to clean up our banks, and a fiscal union to protect the euro. And in order to fight the protectionism of Trump and Brexit, we need a Europe that is vocal and strong on the world stage.

Brexit has opened people's eyes. Don't misunderstand me. People are still very critical towards the European Union, and for good reason. But to leave Europe, to destroy Europe, that nobody wants. On the contrary, I think it's fair to say there is a renewed belief in Europe. I repeat, not in this Europe, but in a different Europe, a reformed Europe. Anyway, people have started voting pro-European again - in Austria, in the Netherlands, in France and soon in Germany. But these are not votes for a status quo. This is a way of people saying: we give you one last chance to make Europe work, to make it better, to make it fit for the future. Or in the words of Seamus Heaney : *"we believe that a further shore is reachable from here"*.

Thank you.