



Speech by Michel Barnier at the Joint Houses of the Oireachtas (Houses of Parliament of Ireland), Dublin

Dublin, 11 May 2017

Mr. Speakers,

Taoiseach,

Members of the Houses of the Oireachtas,

A chairde,

I am happy and honoured to address both Houses and to greet you, as the representatives of the people of Ireland, in all your political diversity.

I take this honour as a responsibility.

The responsibility to listen to all those who will be affected by the decision of the UK to leave the European Union.

The responsibility to listen to your concerns, build our positions together, negotiate in our common interest.

The responsibility to explain that we need each other: that Ireland is stronger in the Union.

And the EU is stronger with Ireland.

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Your country has had deep historical, cultural and intellectual ties to continental Europe for many centuries.

In the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, Irish Colleges were set up around Europe: from Madrid – where I was yesterday –, to Leuven, Paris, Rome and Prague.

They contributed to writing the history of Ireland and the history of Europe. And they spread Irish culture to the continent.

Centuries later, in 1972, the people of Ireland massively voted to take part in the European project.

I was 21 at the time. France had a referendum on the accession of Ireland, the UK, Denmark and Norway.

It was my very first vote. And I campaigned for a "yes" vote.

For the UK's accession, back then, voting yes was not so easy for a member of the French Gaullist party. But I did it with my full heart.

And I never regretted that vote. I regret that Brexit is happening now.

I would have liked to have seen the UK staying in Europe, with Ireland and all the 26 other Member States. But we are where we are.

Since 1972, we have accomplished great things together.

The European Union has helped Ireland become what it is today. And Ireland has complemented and strengthened our Union.

The Irish people are known as hard working and open-minded.

They saw EU membership as a chance to modernise their economy and society.

We see this now in innovative companies and in the creation of new jobs. Investors see Ireland as being central in the European market, not peripheral.

And we see it across Irish cities, towns and villages. They have been enriched by fellow Europeans who have come here to work, study, travel, and live.

Séamus Heaney said to mark the enlargement of the EU in 2004:

"So on a day when newcomers appear/

Let it be a homecoming and let us speak/
move lips, move minds and make new meanings flare."

Ireland has welcomed them, like you yourself were welcomed thirty years earlier.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For 44 years, Irish people have shaped the Union.

They have helped turn Europe into a more open and innovative continent.

Ireland's first European Commissioner, Patrick Hillery, played a major role in improving equality between women and men, before serving as your President.

Another Irish Commissioner, Peter Sutherland, supported the creation of the single market. And he established the Erasmus programme – bringing young Europeans closer together for 30 years now and showing what free movement of people really means.

Today Phil Hogan is in charge of developing what is the Union's most economic complete policy, the Common Agricultural Policy.

Honourable Members,

Some, in large countries with imperial pasts, like my own, seem to think that the EU makes them smaller. This is simply not true.

In smaller countries, people are often more aware that being part of the EU increases influence and opportunities.

And that being part of a common project and identity does not prevent a country from keeping its own identity and making a name for itself in the world – as Enda Kenny reminded us all in his excellent Saint Patrick's Day speech in Washington.

Pooling national sovereignty increases our European sovereignty.

Because they are part of the EU, citizens of all our countries can study, work, and settle down in another Member State. And be treated like nationals.

European consumers can access high quality food and agricultural products from across the EU because they all meet strict standards. Suppliers do not have to worry about border checks.

Because they are part of the EU, citizens travelling to another EU country will soon be able to call without roaming charges, as if they were calling from home.

Airlines, whatever Member State they come from, can offer direct flights between any two EU airports. They can rely on our open skies agreement with the US. The EU has made travel easier. And Irish airlines have been among the first to take advantage of these benefits and have profoundly changed the market.

Honourable Members,

Being together makes us all stronger.

Because we are part of the EU, businesses can trade goods without customs duties and documentation requirements are very simple. As part of the EU's single market, companies can rely on fair competition, with a level playing field.

Because the EU has consistently put in place high levels of environmental protection, citizens enjoy cleaner air and water. Governments can resist a race to the bottom. And fight climate change more effectively together.

EU companies have privileged access to 60 foreign markets, such as South Korea, Vietnam and Canada. Thanks to the free trade agreements negotiated at EU-level.

Banks, insurance or investment funds can provide services in the whole single market, based on their establishment here in Dublin. Thanks to the so-called "passporting rights".

Because they are part of the EU, judges can rely on the European arrest warrant. It ensures the rapid treatment of requests for surrendering suspected criminals from another Member State to bring them to justice.

Because they are part of the EU, universities receive funding for research and innovation. They form one of the widest academic networks in the world.

Dear speakers and honourable Members,

As a Union member, this is what we enjoy.

This is what a Member State enjoys and what it loses when it leaves the Union.

But let's also be clear: Brexit will come at a cost also to us, the 27.

I am fully aware that some Member States will be more affected than others.

As the EU's chief negotiator, my objective is to reach a fair deal.

A deal that defends the interests of the entire EU, but also those of the individual Member States.

Because of its historical and geographical ties with the UK, because of your shared border and strong economic links, Ireland is in a unique position.

With the depreciation of the sterling, Brexit is already having an impact on the value of Irish exports to the UK. In particular, the agri-food sector.

And many in Ireland fear the return of tensions in the North.

Today, in front of these two houses, I want to reassure the Irish people: in this negotiation Ireland's interest will be the Union's interest.

We are in this negotiation together and a united EU will be here for you.

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Tomorrow, I will travel to the border with Northern Ireland.

I will meet farmers and workers in a dairy co-operative.

I want to learn from them.

And listen to their concerns about how they are affected by Brexit.

Some might be concerned about their exports to the UK or by the return of custom checks at the border.

Others might fear a return to the instability of the past.

In Northern Ireland, lifting the borders took time.

Only 15 years ago did check-points and controls totally disappear. Thanks to the Good Friday Agreement that ended decades of violence.

I was the European Commissioner in charge of the PEACE programme. And I have not forgotten my conversations with John Hume and David Trimble, who spoke to me on its importance.

I understand the Union's role in strengthening dialogue in Northern Ireland and supporting the Good Friday Agreement.

European integration helped to remove borders that once existed on maps and in minds.

Brexit changes the external borders of the EU. I will work with you to avoid a hard border.

The UK's departure from the EU will have consequences. We have a duty to speak the truth.

Customs controls are part of EU border management. They protect the single market. They protect our food safety and our standards.

But I already said many times: nothing in this negotiation should put peace at risk.

This was recognised by the 27 Heads of State and Government two weeks ago. They were very clear that the Good Friday Agreement must be respected in all its dimensions.

I also made very clear that the border issue will be one of my three priorities for the first phase of the negotiation. Together with citizens' rights and the financial settlement.

We first must make sufficient progress on these points, before we start discussing the future of our relationship with the UK.

The sooner this will happen, the better.

If the conditions are right, a close partnership with the UK is in everybody's interest.

And in Ireland's interest in particular.

- Currently, Ireland exports 14% of its goods and 20% of its services to the UK. This is twice the EU average.
- The agricultural and energy sectors are fully interconnected on the island of Ireland.

Of course, such facts must be put in perspective.

- Before Ireland's accession to the EU in 1973, the UK accounted for over 50% of Irish trade.
- Today, Ireland exports much more to the other EU countries than to the UK. And the single market is a key asset for your financial and pharmaceutical industry.

Still, the specific issues that you face deserve all our attention.

Once again, Ireland shares a land border with the UK. And most of its trade to the EU goes through the UK.

This is why I have engaged with the Dáil and Seanad, the government and its administration, as well as all the Irish Members of the European Parliament, immediately after taking up my position.

Ireland has done remarkable preparatory work.

We have to use our combined strength. Together, we are working towards solutions.

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I want to listen to the concerns of the Irish people. But I also want to pass on a message of hope and determination.

For all the problems it creates, Brexit also reminds us of what the EU has built together.

What each of us enjoys as an EU citizen and how we can further improve the European project. This EU is not perfect. We know that. President Juncker put it candidly on the occasion of Europe Day this week.

There are lessons to draw from the crisis, there are lessons to draw from Brexit and from the rising scores of populist parties in many countries, including mine. Let's not confuse public opinion with populism.

We should listen to people's feelings and respond with policy change. This is how we will fight populism.

I am convinced that Ireland will play a major role in these changes.

- As a centre for innovation
- As a strong and sustainable agri-food producer
- As a bridge across the Atlantic
- As a supporter of the future relationship that we need to build with the UK.

Our objective is clear: we want these negotiations to succeed.

I want us to reach a deal.

The UK has been a member of the EU for 44 years. It should remain a close partner.

- We will need to negotiate a "bold and ambitious", but also fair free-trade agreement.
- But we will need the same ambition for our research and innovation networks and for the fight against climate change.
- We need the same ambition in foreign policy, in international cooperation and development.

27 years ago, Nelson Mandela spoke in this very room – just a few months after he was released from jail.

He praised Ireland's leadership within the European Community to maintain strong pressure on the apartheid system in South Africa.

Tomorrow, our international partners should be able to turn to the EU and the UK. And find in them strong and united advocates of our shared European values.

Finally, we need the same ambition in the field of our internal and external security, whether it is the fight against terrorism, the exchange of information, the fight against hybrid threats or cybersecurity.

Ladies and gentlemen, if we put things in the right order, if we negotiate with mutual respect, without any aggression and naivety, and if we are open to finding solutions, there is no reason why our strong Europe cannot maintain a strong relationship with the UK.

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Honourable Members,

I have myself been a national parliamentarian for more than 17 years – both in the French Assemblée and the Senate. I will listen carefully to the views of the Taoiseach and all party leaders.

In the negotiations and public debate that now start, you have as a national Parliament an essential role to play, together with the European Parliament and civil society.

That is why I have been so honoured by your invitation to address the two Houses of Parliament of Ireland.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh!

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