

IUA Future of Ireland – Ireland in a changing Europe Commissioner Mairead McGuinness Speech

- Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,
- Delighted to be with you – though if truth be told I’m growing weary of video conferences and yearn to meet people again!
- We face a number of significant challenges in Ireland and in Europe.
- First and foremost is, of course, the ongoing pandemic. None of us could have imagined last March that we would still be living with COVID almost a year later.
- But a crisis, as difficult as it may be, can also present an opportunity for reflection and change.
- We want to build a more sustainable, more digital and more resilient Europe.
- Universities have a vital role to play in this vision for the future.

Brexit

- **I know that Brexit will be a topic in our conversation today so let me make a few points.**
- As you know, Brexit was and is a UK decision. It was not a choice of the European Union. And we have accepted the UK choice, of course with regret.
- You will all know how difficult it was to reach a Withdrawal Agreement with the UK, including the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. And then to reach agreement on the Trade and Cooperation Agreement after that.

- But we did reach agreement and the TCA, as well as the Protocol, came into effect on January 1, this year.
- Was everything ready and in place to deal with the changed circumstances? No is the answer. That's why my colleague Maros Sefcovic agreed with Michael Gove on December 17th a set of measures to alleviate the transition to the new situation arising from the UK's decision to leave the EU.
- Recent events has reignited the discussion and debate on the Protocol. The circumstances were unfortunate. We made a mistake.
- But it is a reminder that we do need to pay attention to the Protocol and make sure that it works for the people of Northern Ireland.
- Vice-President Sefcovic will work closely with Lord David Frost who has been newly appointed by the UK Government to co-chair the Partnership Council and the Joint Committee.
- I am saddened when I hear doubts cast on the EU's commitment to Northern Ireland and the peace process. Nothing could be further from the truth.
- I will recall the late John Hume who helped to build peace against great odds. He knew that the EU itself is a peace project and that within the EU, there was scope to build a lasting peace in Northern Ireland.
- John may not have known how Brexit would impact Northern Ireland. But he would be alarmed about talk of borders.
- It is important for calm and respect to prevail over anger and accusation.

- The UK has left the EU but we remain attached in so many ways, including via Northern Ireland, so we need to work closely together and implement what we have agreed.
- The UK's decision to leave the European Union, its single market and its customs union has serious consequences. As does the UK's decision not to align in many areas – such as animal and plant health. That decision to diverge wherever possible impacts on the implementation of the Protocol.
- In higher education, there has been a lot of attention on the UK choice to leave the Erasmus programme, which will impact student mobility for British and EU students. We regret this decision.
- The UK did decide to stay part of Horizon Europe, the EU's flagship research programme - this is welcome. Collaboration between scientists is important.
- In financial services, Brexit has resulted in a significant regime change. But thanks to forward planning, we did not see volatility or disruption in markets when the transition period ended on December 31st.
- Here too we will need to have a relationship with the UK. The EU and the UK agreed to reach a Memorandum of Understanding on Financial Services by March 2021.
- I envisage a framework similar to what the EU has with the US: a voluntary structure to compare regulatory initiatives, exchange views on international developments, and discuss equivalence-related issues.
- I'm optimistic that over time, through cooperation and trust, we will build a stable and balanced relationship with our UK friends.

COVID-19 recovery

- On top of adjusting to Brexit, we are also dealing with a health and economic crisis.
- As I said in my introduction, a crisis can also be a chance for reflection.
- My first reflection is how unprepared we - the so-called developed world - were for dealing with a public health crisis.
- My second reflection is how we have all adjusted to this new way of living and working.
- And my third reflection is how important it is to have experts guide us in how we are dealing with Covid at national, EU and global level.
- It is not that long ago that experts were being disregarded by some of the world's leaders.
- And while there are some disagreements between experts on specific aspects of the pandemic - all agree on the basic principles of how to protect ourselves and our community and on the important role of vaccines in tackling this disease.
- This crisis also highlights for me the importance of publicly funded research and the role of public/private partnerships in bringing quality science, high-quality research to the frontline in tackling issues.
- On that note I was delighted to see the news that UCD and NUI Galway are involved in VACCELERATE, the new EU vaccine clinical network spanning 21 EU countries to accelerate the trialing of Covid-19 vaccines.

Green growth.

- We are beginning to focus on life after this pandemic and in particular the need for a different recovery.
- Public supports will be necessary for some time to come - the role of the state is and will continue to be larger than in the past, because of the nature of this public health crisis.
- The EU's main response to the economic crisis is **Next Generation EU** – a package worth €750 billion euros – on top of a revamped long-term EU budget of €1.1 trillion.
- It will enable investment in technologies to spark the recovery through innovation and clean industries. It will strengthen the European Green Deal and will invest in key infrastructure, from 5G to housing renovation.
- Member States have to submit national plans where they must meet targets of at least 37 percent spending on green projects and at least 20 percent on digital.
- The European Green Deal entered into before the pandemic is probably more important today precisely because of the pandemic.
- We have committed to climate neutrality by 2050. And a more ambitious cut in emissions by 2030 of at least 55 percent compared to 1990 levels. That's alongside plans to halt biodiversity loss, combat pollution and enhance the circular economy.
- These targets will be impossible to achieve if we continue as we are now.
- So, we cannot fail - the consequences are too grave and will be placed on the shoulders of our younger generation, already hit hard by the pandemic and concerned about their future.

- In my own portfolio, I am responsible for sustainable finance: reorienting the financial system so that it helps us achieve our climate and environmental targets.
- We need an enormous amount of investment to recover from this crisis and to fund the green agenda.
- Public investment will not be enough. We need to mobilise private investment if we want Europe to recover quickly – and to deliver on climate goals.
- We're working on a Renewed Sustainable Finance Strategy to be released later this year.
- We will look at how to accelerate the transition to sustainability and boost sustainable investments for the recovery.
- Sustainability and long-termism must be at the heart of corporate and investment decision-making.
- The strategy will also recognise that sustainable finance is not just about climate, but also broader environmental aims like biodiversity and social objectives.

Digital transition

- As I said, the recovery is an opportunity for change and going hand-in-hand with the green transition is the digital transition.
- The pandemic has accelerated many technological changes.
- Universities have moved most of their teaching and learning online. It is staggering that our universities are largely empty! As someone who

loved the campus experience, I feel sorry for students studying from home and without the company of their friends.

- The pandemic has been difficult – but technology has demonstrated its potential.
- The 2020s should be Europe's Digital Decade, a decade when Europe becomes a global leader in the digital world.
- This means using technological and social innovation for a sustainable and inclusive recovery.
- Education and training systems, including universities, will need to provide the skills necessary to use technology, satisfy the evolving needs of the labour market, and enable the people they educate to become innovators.

Role of universities in research and innovation in finance and beyond

- Universities are a site of education – but their role is much wider.
- They are also engaged socially: combating inequalities, fighting climate change, researching diseases, and strengthening democratic values.
- We need academics who are willing and able with solid evidence to speak up on social, political and financial issues.
- One of my achievements in the European Parliament was to encourage Irish universities to send experts to address Committee hearings in the Parliament. This is something that needs to continue and be strengthened. It is good for our universities, for our academics and for the sharing of knowledge in policymaking.

- This Commission wants to strengthen the links between education, research and innovation.
- The higher education landscape is changing rapidly across Europe, with changes in how, what, when and where people are learning.
- Our objective is to support universities across Europe to be the best in the world, with a focus on excellence, inclusion and cooperation.
- That's why the Commission is working on a Higher Education Transformation Agenda.
- Our vision is for the universities of the future to be more interconnected, innovative, open, inclusive and digital – while of course respecting institutional autonomy and academic freedom.
- This Agenda needs the input of the higher education sector, including Irish universities.
- A consultation process started at the Education Summit in December, and it will include an open online consultation, expert meetings, and targeted meetings with European universities in the first half of 2021.
- I am aware that in the wake of the financial crisis, many universities experienced increased financial pressure – and the pandemic has increased this pressure again.
- Universities and other third level establishments need certainty about funding. Minister Simon Harris is showing huge engagement with the sector in Ireland...

Closing

- So, it is a difficult time - but a crisis offers us the chance to reflect where we might have gone wrong in the past.
- As we look to the recovery, we are not looking to recreate the world that came before.
- Universities, experts and academics have a key role in shaping the future that we're now looking to build.
- Thank you.