



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE
FOR THE OFFICE OF THE
FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY
FIRST MINISTER

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Evidence Session with Permanent
Representations to the European Union**

10 June 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Danny Kennedy (Chairperson)
Mr Tom Elliott
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Mr Carlos García de Cortázar) Spanish Permanent Representation to the European Union
Ms Muriel Rabau) Belgian Permanent Representation to the European Union
Ms Katalin Nagy) Hungarian Permanent Representation to the European Union

The Chairperson (Mr Kennedy):

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to this special meeting of the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which scrutinises the work of that Department. We are particularly pleased to be in Brussels for the meeting. On behalf of my colleagues, I extend our thanks to everyone concerned for their help, co-operation and assistance in making the visit and meeting possible.

The objective of the meeting is to receive evidence from the trio of representatives of the presidencies of the Council of the European Union. We very much look forward to the evidence session. I politely remind everyone to switch off their mobile phones lest they interfere with the recording of the meeting, which will be reported by Hansard.

I am very pleased to welcome to the hearing Mr Carlos García de Cortázar, who is a representative of the Spanish Government. Carlos represents the Spanish Permanent Representation to the European Union on the presidencies priorities on social inclusion and combating poverty. Having produced a report on child poverty in 2009, the Committee is particularly interested in trying to combat that problem. I understand that Carlos has provided us with a written briefing, which we will provide to everyone. Perhaps, Carlos, you would make a brief presentation for around 10 minutes and leave yourself available for a question-and-answer session. You are extremely welcome. Thank you very much indeed for your co-operation.

Mr Carlos García de Cortázar (Spanish Permanent Representation to the European Union):

Thank you very much for the invitation. When you start a presidency, you have to learn new skills for new jobs. The first new skill that you have to learn is how to be in two different places at the same moment. That is called bilocation. You learn bilocation slowly. By the end of your presidency, you have the skill. Suddenly, your presidency is over and you do not need the skill anymore.

Spain's presidency was not the one we wanted to have at all. We wanted to have an interesting, important and effective presidency. We have a new Commission, which, unfortunately, started working late into our presidency. We have a new treaty, which was approved, adopted and put into force in November 2009. We have a new Parliament. We even have new proposals for the Commission. That means that we have had to use instruments that another presidency did not want or reach agreement on. That is one of the most important factors.

Of course, you have to try everything that you can to make your presidency a success. We have followed our hearts. In the social field, at least, I imagine that, at the end of our presidency, we can say that we have had a good result.

I will speak about poverty and social inclusion in particular. Everybody speaks about poverty and social inclusion. However, when you want to introduce provisions or enforce actions, everybody starts to have problems. Even though I say that now was not, perhaps, the best time to have a presidency, it is true that it was a very good time to talk about poverty and social inclusion for two reasons. The first reason is because 2010 was declared the year for combating poverty and social exclusion. The second reason is the problems that were caused by the financial crisis led to an economic crisis then a social crisis. It is true that the number of poor people and those excluded increased a lot in the last months. For those reasons, the fight against poverty was not only a theoretical priority for the Spanish presidency but a practical priority for the EU.

When the trio of presidencies spoke about a year ago to prepare our programme, we spoke about child poverty, which is one of our main problems. Child poverty was an important issue and, as we needed to modify the Lisbon strategy and set up the 2020 strategy, we thought that there was the possibility of including a reference to target child poverty. Maybe the social crisis helped us because, suddenly, the Commission was aware that the new strategy could not be related to only innovation, education and employment, but needed a reference to social inclusion, poverty and the fight against social exclusion. The Commission proposed to reduce the number of poor people by 20% in the next 10 years.

The European Council had a meeting in March, at which it decided at least three targets, including for innovation and employment. However, it had so many political and practical difficulties, including problems with the treaty, sovereignty and subsidiarity, that it could not reach an agreement on a target for the reduction of poverty. We were afraid that that could be the first step to eliminate any reference in the 2020 strategy to social inclusion and the fight against poverty.

The European Council gave the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) and the Social Protection Committee a mandate for establishing a numerical target, the indicators for calculating that target and which kind of people could be included in that concept of poverty. The Social Protection Committee did a wonderful job and the European Council did not dare to establish a numerical target. It was afraid that, if it included or established a numerical target, it would not have unanimity. Therefore, it did not propose a numerical target but, instead, proposed three indicators for calculating poverty. The first is a classic indicator: people at the risk of poverty, which is people living on less than 60% of the

national minimum income. That is a common indicator that everybody uses when they speak about poverty. However, that was not enough, and we needed a second indicator, which was about people who are materially deprived. There are nine situations in that indicator. For instance, can they afford to pay their rent, keep their homes warm or deal with unexpected expenses? Can they afford to eat meat, fish or a protein equivalent every second day; have a week's holiday once a year; or have a car, washing machine, colour television or telephone? If they answer no to at least four of those questions, they are among the collective poor.

The third indicator was about people living in jobless households. It is clear that unemployment has increased sharply in Europe in recent months. There are a lot of households in which no one works and which do not receive money as a result of someone working. Those three indicators show that there are approximately 130 million in poverty in Europe.

The work was done, but now the most difficult thing was to convince the Ministers, who are responsible for employment, social policy, health and consumer affairs, at a meeting in Luxembourg on 7 June 2010 to accept those three indicators and establish a target to reduce poverty by at least 20 million. That is the minimum target. As a member state, we are, of course, obliged to try to increase that reduction of people in poverty.

We have to submit that target and the indicators to the European Council meeting on 17 June 2010. We suppose and, especially, hope, that the European Council will adopt that target and those three indicators. A lot of work has still to be done. For the first time, however, and most importantly, we are taking into account not only employment, innovation, education, vocational training, and, perhaps, the elimination CO₂, but, from the five targets of the 2020 strategy, social inclusion, the fight against poverty, and social exclusion.

Those have symbolic meaning, because for the first time, the European institutions — Parliament, Council, and presidency — go hand in hand and define that Europe has to be the Europe of not only the free market but of solidarity. This is the start. Of course, it is now up to us to continue with those ideas and develop the fight against poverty.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much, Carlos, for that presentation. You mentioned indicators. Your initial target is to eradicate poverty for 20 million people. Do you have any target dates in mind?

Previous indicators have been such that they have tended to alleviate rather than eradicate poverty, particularly child poverty. How do you see the new indicators helping to achieve the eradication or alleviation of child poverty in particular?

Mr García de Cortázar:

Our first idea was the alleviation of child poverty, because if someone is poor and excluded as a child, they will have a small chance of social inclusion in the future. Poverty is not the only problem. Poverty can, for some collectives, be a temporary situation. However, the problem for children is that the temporary situation can become a permanent situation.

Maybe, once in our life, we can be poor, and that is not so bad. I slept on the streets in Paris for some weeks because I did not have any money. The experience was good for me, but it was a temporary situation. I did not feel excluded. The problem for children is that they start to feel excluded when they are small. That means that they think that exclusion is something that they deserve. That can lead to bad qualifications and bad education. One of the biggest problems is that, if the father is poor and excluded, the child will also usually be poor and excluded. That creates a chain of poverty.

Child poverty is not the easiest thing to fight. Some member states fight against poverty with social transfers, but it is difficult for another member state to give as much social transfer. Taking 20 million people at the risk of poverty out of that situation will have a direct impact on child poverty. If we try to bring the father and mother out of poverty, we will increase the number of children coming out of poverty. The second step has to be to set a clear target for child poverty reduction, because that is the most dangerous exclusion that exists.

The Chairperson:

OK, Carlos, thank you. Other members will now ask questions.

Mrs D Kelly:

Thank you for your presentation, Carlos. I wish the Spanish presidency well in its work.

How, as a European nation, will we eradicate child poverty? You mentioned education, and we know that good education is a way out of poverty. However, will member states consider welfare systems and attempt to equalise those across Europe? That should be done if we are

going to have an immediate impact on medium-, short- and long-term goals. Will you explain that?

Mr García de Cortázar:

Child poverty is only a starting point for other issues. Figures for life expectancy show that poor people die at an earlier age than richer people. The problem is not only about money but health services and education. A big problem for poor people is health inequality. Some children who are in poverty are from special collectives, such as migrants, Roma and monoparental families. In Europe, it is difficult to find child poverty if mama and papa work. Child poverty especially occurs in families with only one breadwinner and among minorities such as Roma and migrants.

Combating poverty is the first step, and the second step is combating social exclusion. If we do not fight against child poverty, in future, some of the population will be socially excluded. The best means of social inclusion is employment. There are many difficulties with unemployment, because many people are not even pre-prepared for working. There has to be a social safety net so that even people who are poor are not socially excluded. The most important fight, even more than the fight against poverty, is against exclusion. People can be perhaps free from poverty, but they can never be free from social exclusion. That is especially the case with children.

In Germany, a special benefit called Hartz IV was introduced, and this is now the third generation of Hartz IV. Grandfathers and fathers have already been beneficiaries, and now people who are 17, 18 and 19 are Hartz IV beneficiaries. It results in a transition out of poverty and exclusion. We have to fight against something. At least, we could perhaps ensure that children, even if they are poor, are not excluded. My priority would be to fight against the exclusion of children through education, health and social services.

Mr Spratt:

Thank you for your presentation, Carlos. Can you provide some insight into any focus on work to help folks with disabilities and any other such vulnerable groups?

Mr García de Cortázar:

Yes. With the social crisis, one of the most horrible nightmares would be that we make two divisions of workers. The first division of workers would have all the rights and would be

entitled to everything, and the second division of workers would include that vulnerable collective of women, the disabled and migrants. That is very tangible and dangerous. Disabled people are one of the more vulnerable groups in that collective because they have problems not only with work but with life.

As you know, during our presidency, we are discussing a directive that is based on article 19 of the Lisbon Treaty, which deals with non-discrimination based on disability, age, religion and sexual orientation. The directive is complicated. We thought that there might have been problems with sexual orientation in some countries, such as Poland, or with religion in other countries, but that was not true. The problems actually started when we looked at disabilities, because fighting against the discrimination of people with disabilities costs a lot of money. Let us say, for example, that we need someone to work for us. A disabled person can work perfectly, but they may need special things inside the building. It costs a lot of money to accommodate a disabled person in a building and office. For instance, blind people require a specially designed computer.

In the European Union, everybody agrees when we discuss principles. However — let us speak the truth — things are a little bit different when we discuss euros or pounds. If you asked people whether they would you like to fight against the discrimination of people with disabilities, they would say, “Yes, of course”, but to do that costs money. It costs a lot of money to prepare everything. During our presidency, we noticed that, even if everybody agreed with the idea of non-discrimination in the field of disability, the reality of that — the preparation that would be required to be able to offer equal treatment to persons with disabilities — would be different than we thought.

A lot of people with disabilities are poor, first, because their pensions are not very high and, secondly, because most have had their disability from childhood. They double up with disability. As well as that, they have two more problems: education and health. In the end, we have to point out to that second group, including children and monoparental women, that we will invest in that fight against discrimination.

Mr Molloy:

Thank you for your presentation, Carlos, and for the answers you have given the Committee so far. In your presentation, you mentioned the families of jobless people, and in our country,

sometimes there are two or three generations of jobless people in the same family. Do you have any ideas on how that cycle can be broken?

During the Spanish presidency of the EU, the idea of promoting inclusion programmes with active participation was put forward. How do you see that operating as we move into a situation when it may not be feasible for everyone to be employed?

Mr García de Cortázar:

The best way to achieve inclusion is always through employment. However, we must not forget that something like 8% of workers are considered as poor people. That means that we are building a labour market, but those people's salaries mean they are in poverty.

There are two parts to the transmission of poverty and joblessness. The first thing we must understand with a jobless person is the psychological impression he has of himself. Before we begin to measure inclusion in employment, we must prevent those types of people falling into exclusion, because if they are marginalised, it is difficult for them to return to work. We must have a clear social safety net to avoid that person being excluded. That is the first step and it is not yet linked with employment, but that person will need a minimum income to act in society as a normal person. The moment that person can be considered normal from an economic or psychological point of view, the second part of the transmission comes into play, which involves vocational training, training and adaptation to work.

In Spain, we have experience of people — particularly those skilled workers over 40 — who lose their jobs, fall into exclusion depression and find it difficult to get back into the labour market. We must prevent those people falling into exclusion and put them into a second place where they get some benefits and a minimum income. That idea can perhaps be better developed under the Belgian presidency of the EU, as they are speaking more about minimal revenues than we are.

A recommendation was made in 1992 to address these issues, and it is astonishing that nothing has been done since then. That is really dangerous. In 1992, we spoke seriously about minimum incomes, maybe not with binding legislation but with legislation. During the trio's presidency, we tried to speak with the Commission to say that it may be time to modify the minimum incomes recommendation of 1992. However, we found that difficult because member states were

not so interested in the modification. After almost 20 years, it is time that we show that Europe is travelling in that direction.

Mr Elliott:

Thank you, Carlos. My question is relatively simple and should bring a simple answer. If there is one thing that confuses me about poverty, it is that so many indicators and methods of calculation are used. You said that there were three indicators or methods of calculation. You also said that the number of people in poverty is to be reduced by at least 20 million. Which of the three indicators do you use to calculate that 20 million? Is it just a case of using whatever indicator seems to be doing best at the time? The different indicators and methods of calculation are confusing.

Mr García de Cortázar:

That is a technical point. We calculate that the figure for the first indicator, for instance, people at risk of poverty, will be something like 80 million. However, using all three indicators, we reach a figure of 130 million. It will be a problem for the technicians to include the different people in every group, but we felt that we could give a complete picture using only one indicator. Take the material deprivation indicator, for instance. Only 3% or 4% of people fall into that category in a country such as Spain, because Spain may be different in some way and have nice weather, for example. Part of that indicator may be whether people can heat their houses, but it is much easier to heat a house in Spain than in Northern Ireland.

Mr Elliott:

I agree.

Mr García de Cortázar:

It is true. That second indicator, for instance, may be much bigger in the eastern countries than in a country such as ours. The number of jobless households is an interesting indicator. A figure of 60% for the people at risk of poverty may be a good indicator. However, 60% in Luxembourg, where the income may be €30,000, is different to 60% in Spain, where the income may be less than €6,000. Maybe 80% or 90% of people have a house that they bought years ago and, therefore, do not need to pay anything for rent. The different situations of different countries obliged the Social Protection Committee to look for a system that would be not too bad and not too good for anybody.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much, Carlos. We have greatly enjoyed your presentation this morning; it has been very interesting and informative. We look forward to engagement with you in the future. Best wishes to you and the Spanish Representation.

I am pleased to welcome Muriel Rabau, the representative from the Belgian Permanent Representation to the EU, to indicate the priorities for the EU presidency on social inclusion and combating poverty. Thank you very much for your attendance this morning, Muriel. We look forward to your comments. The session is being recorded. You are welcome to stay, Carlos, for the rest of the session.

Mr García de Cortázar:

Unfortunately, I have to be in the European Parliament. This was an example of the bi-location that I talked about. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson:

Muriel, the evidence session will be reported by Hansard from the Northern Ireland Assembly. You should make a brief opening statement, after which members will ask questions.

Ms Muriel Rabau (Belgian Permanent Representation to the European Union):

It is difficult to talk after Carlos because he was great. I will try my best. Moreover, the Spanish presidency has been great and has done a lot on social issues. Some nations will pursue the actions of the Spanish presidency, including its work on the pension system. However, we will have a conference on continuing the work that Spain has done. The Social Protection Committee (SPC) will continue its work with joint reflections on the adequacy and sustainability of pensions.

The Council hopes to reach a conclusion by the end of the year, because pensions form one of the main social security systems that ensure that people do not live in poverty and provide insurance for life. In Belgium, we really believe that social inclusion policies and focus policies are important but, first of all, social security systems are important to ensure that people avoid a life of poverty. We believe that both approaches are important to reduce the poverty level.

As Carlos said, we will have several conferences and initiatives on poverty, one of which will be on child poverty. We will organise a conference on child poverty and well-being and on the

participation of children in the policies. Our first conference will be in September. To ensure continuity with the framework of the 2008 SPC report, the Commission will produce a report. Belgium wants to continue work on that issue with the idea of making a recommendation or a text with political commitments.

All the issues will be dealt with during the European Year Against Poverty, which seeks to achieve a declaration from all the heads of state. We have the feeling that the work done in many thematic European years stops at the end of those years, and we want a political commitment to ensure continuation of the work done during those years. The Spanish presidency has, with everybody on board, including the Commission, established its target on poverty. All our activity will be in line with that target of reducing poverty by 20 million people. We hope to have a declaration on the implementation of the strategies to reduce poverty and the ambitions linked to that.

We will have a round-table discussion on social inclusion, one theme of which will be minimum income. As Carlos said, we have the 1992 recommendation, and it will be the framework within which we will try to go further on minimum income. The active inclusion strategy has three strands, one of which is about having sufficient resources or a minimum income that will permit people to live in dignity, to work and to participate in society. The round-table discussion will focus on that, and we hope to have something to include in the final declaration of 2010.

A conference on housing will be organised towards the end of the presidency. We believe that social security is important but that we also have to do something for the most excluded in our society — the homeless. Homeless people are in extreme poverty, and we really want to do something about that. All our initiatives are organised with the Commission, because both are stronger if we support each other. All our initiatives are linked in with SPC works and so on.

We want an initiative that will implement the poverty target and the flagship poverty platform. We want to organise a conference in September on how we can reinforce the visibility of the strategy and what were called, initially, the open method of co-ordination (OMC) tools. Now, we try to refocus. Maybe it is more important to think of the future, the social dimension in 2020 and the interaction between the OMC tools and the poverty platform. Until now, it has not been clear if the poverty platform will deal only with poverty or with a broad scope of issues. One thing we

do not want to do is to separate poverty policies from other social policies. The OMC includes health care, long-term care and pensions. We do not want to separate those policies, because we think it is a whole-dimension strategy. We do not yet know if the SPC will come to the forum with an opinion or if we will have a conclusion from the Council. However, that would be an idea, to try to strengthen, in one way or the other, the social dimension in Europe and the tools to achieve it.

We will, with the Commission, organise the third forum on social services of general interest. It is important in Europe to protect and ensure the legal certainty of those services and to strengthen their accessibility and quality. There is also the important issue of the disability strategy. We will not present conclusions because the French presidency has done a good job on that. However, we will organise a conference at the end of our presidency to decide how to ensure that the UN convention is implemented. The Commission will also draw up a new strategy framework to support that and to continue that important theme in Europe. Apart from a conference on the social economy, that completes my submission on the events that we want to organise.

The Chairperson:

Thanks for that presentation. To what extent will you be representing Belgium's interests rather than overall European interests during your presidency? In particular, what impact will you have on addressing the social and economic problems of your own country as well as influencing overall policy in Europe?

Ms Rabau:

That is a difficult question. It is possible to have a balance between what we, as Belgians, think is important. For instance, the themes of the conferences that we organise are what we regard as the most important issues to be addressed. However, the European Social Protection Committee (SPC) is not part of the Commission. However, that is only one part of the presidency. The presidency's main role is to ensure that as much progress is possible is made during the year in office by finding a consensus among the different points of view. Although there is much legislative work to be done during a presidency, we can go forward only if we get consensus. Frankly, we would like to be more ambitious in some areas, but that is not the idea. The idea is to go as far as we can in reaching a consensus. Those ambitions are complementary and interactive rather than contradictory.

Mr Spratt:

I will go back to an issue that I raised with Carlos García de Cortázar, and I must say that I was shocked by his answer. I regard the United Kingdom as being advanced in ensuring access rights for people with disabilities. However, when the question of employing someone with a disability and suffering from poverty was raised, Carlos Garcia de Cortázar seemed to say that doing so came down to the high cost involved. I was a bit shocked by that. Towards the end of the presentation, a future focus on bringing people with disabilities out of the poverty bracket was mentioned. What focus will the Belgian Government bring to bear on that in its presidential term? That is very important because it would be disgraceful for money to be an issue when it comes to providing the equipment or access services needed to get people with disabilities into work and out of poverty.

Ms Rabau:

The conference will focus on the UN convention, which is really broad and covers many issues. In the round-table discussions, however, we will have one point focused on disabled people and minimum income. It is also possible that the issue of minimum income could be discussed during the informal meeting of Ministers at the beginning of our presidency, but one of the groups that need minimum income or incentives to be able to participate in and facilitate work will be dealt with. What I mean is that, apart from a conference on disabled people, we will deal, in several conferences, with the specific problems of disabled people. Also, in the forum on social services, we want people representing the European Development Fund (EDF). It is very important to have the points of view of disabled people or organisations that represent them. I am not sure that I have answered your question.

Mr Spratt:

I raised the issue with Carlos García de Cortázar, but there was not enough time to come back to it. People with disabilities need to be dealt with very sympathetically to bring them out of the poverty bracket. Finance should not be an issue. In the United Kingdom, there has to be disability access to all buildings. From what Carlos said in his presentation, I got the impression that the amount of money that had to be spent to ensure access to buildings became controversial. I want an assurance that people who are vulnerable due to disability will be dealt with sympathetically and properly. That was the focus of my question.

Ms Rabau:

I know that my secretariat is very keen to implement the conclusion of the Spanish presidency. We were in favour of protecting accessibility in the first place. Of course it costs money, but if there is not a concrete commitment, there may not be any accessibility to buildings in 50 years' time.

The problem of accessibility is very important for our authorities. We really supported what the Spanish presidency proposed in its conclusion, and it is also a starting point. The Commission will come forward with its new framework. There are always steps to go forward, but there needs to be consensus. I assure the Committee that, even if it is difficult — for instance accessibility falls within the competence of individual regions and communities — Belgium will try to secure consensus between the authorities. It is a really important issue. It means not only physical accessibility, but also accessibility to the Internet and to communications on the whole. For example, due to the numericalisation of certain things, the level of accessibility is decreasing instead of increasing. Also, in Belgium, we created a group of relevant, competent authorities that is tasked with seeing how Belgium can be among the advanced member states to implement what is in the convention. We do not know yet what we will do about the directives on equal opportunities for all and non-discrimination, but my secretariat would like to try to go forward and achieve consensus at least on the part that deals with disabled people.

Mr Elliott:

Thank you, Muriel. Following the recent enlargement of the European Union, did its overall social agenda have to be revised?

Ms Rabau:

I do not think that Belgium will adopt any initiatives in line with enlargement. Carlos spoke about agreements on social security between six member states. Depending on the Commission, we do not plan to propose a similar agreement on mutual rights with other member states. However, although we are sensitive to the external dimension of Europe — it is not that we are not interested in those issues — we do not plan to launch any corresponding initiatives.

Mrs D Kelly:

I congratulate Belgium for making social justice one of the main priorities of its presidency. I am interested in the forthcoming housing conference and the links between poor housing and health

inequalities. What outcomes do you hope to achieve as a result of that conference?

Ms Rabau:

The conference is co-organised by the Commission and FEANTSA, the European organisation that deals with housing exclusion and homelessness. Although I am not an expert on this issue, the idea is to see whether consensual methods might advance the social agenda. As I said, I am not an expert on the consensus system. Some of my colleagues may know more about it. In Europe, we do not have a practical definition of “homelessness” or “housing exclusion”, so the second aim of the conference will be to develop a common language. Furthermore, because the conference will take place at the end of the presidency and we cannot deal with everything at a political level, there will be no concrete political follow-up. I am confident that the Commission will take that on board. In the SPC and under the open method of co-ordination (OMC), when we speak of co-ordination, we have thematic years and approaches. One year the theme was child poverty, and last year it was homelessness and housing exclusion. In line with that, we want to organise a big conference on that issue, and perhaps in 2011 the Commission may undertake a follow-up study. We will try to have a conference and a study of the SPC, and maybe one day we will have something stronger. The idea is to put our stone on this issue.

Mr Molloy:

This Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly held an inquiry into Europe to establish how we can better engage with Europe. In view of the fact that the presidency changes every six months, how does Belgium propose to engage with regional assemblies, particularly with the Lisbon Treaty and the subsidiarity role within that?

Ms Rabau:

I am sorry, I am not sure that I understand the question. You were talking about regional assemblies?

Mr Molloy:

Yes, the Northern Ireland Assembly is a regional assembly of the UK. How does the Belgian Government’s Representation on the Commission propose to engage with regional assemblies, particularly in relation to the Lisbon Treaty and the new dimension of subsidiarity, so that decisions should be taken at the lowest common approach?

Ms Rabau:

In Belgium, the regional question is very sensitive. Frankly, we usually try — perhaps not to avoid it, but it is very difficult. In our field, we did not take any special initiative. You are right to say that the Lisbon Treaty will change something, and it will have an impact on Belgium. I think it is a good thing, because legal initiatives will go the national Parliament, and, in Belgium, that will also mean the regional Parliaments, because their competences are at the same level as those of the national Parliament. I think it will be a good opportunity for us to have better links between the European level and the national and regional levels. However, we do not plan to take a special initiative in that area.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much indeed, Muriel, for your presentation and for answering our questions. We greatly value and appreciate the time and the answers that you have given us this morning. You are welcome to stay and to join us later for lunch.

Our next briefing is from Katalin Nagy — I hope that I have pronounced that correctly — from the Hungarian Permanent Representation to the EU. The briefing is on the Hungarian priorities for the EU presidency in relation to social inclusion and combating poverty. You are extremely welcome; thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning. The session will be recorded in the Hansard report, and I ask you to begin with an opening statement and then leave yourself available for questions.

Ms Katalin Nagy (Hungarian Permanent Representation to the European Union):

Thank you. As a matter of fact, I am doubly disadvantaged in making this presentation because not only is our presidency the furthest away and, consequently, it is less clear how our ideas are going to proceed, but there is another reason, which I explained to the organisers. I even offered to have this session arranged at a later date. As you may know, Hungary has just had a general election, which resulted in a change of Government. The new Government have been in office for just 10 days. Although the Government and its political parties put the Hungarian presidency-related issues of employment and inclusion high on the agenda, our presidency preparation that was conducted before the election has, so far, not been confirmed by the new Government and leadership. Consequently, I cannot say too much about it. In particular, I cannot give any evidence because, as a civil servant, I simply do not have the right to do so at present.

However, I can speak about what has come out of procedures that have already been started, which we are going to continue, and what has come out of the Commission working programme, which we are ready to implement. Beyond that, I would not like to make any commitment.

To start with trio presidency-related issues, we work very well with the Spanish and Belgian presidency teams. Indeed, it was a pleasure to prepare our presidency programme together. In the social field, we actually did not have any major dispute. I would say that there was a different emphasis country by country. However, in cases that Hungary did not receive so enthusiastically, we promised to continue procedures that had already been started, and we promised to keep those matters on the agenda.

The other issue that I want to speak about is the Commission's working programme and processes that have already started at EU level. Of course, the main thing in the field of inclusion and poverty is the EU 2020 strategy about which, especially in the field of poverty, Carlos has given quite a lot of detail. I will not try to repeat that. Indeed, we try to concentrate on implementation. Therefore, full implementation will start under the Hungarian presidency. We will try to put implementation on the right track and to make a robust start in that respect.

With regard to the strategy's poverty-related aspects; as Carlos has mentioned, in the second half of the year, there will be a new initiative by the Commission that will be related to the so-called poverty flagship initiative, and it will have special focus on inclusion and child poverty. We will do our best to implement that. However, even before we knew about the EU 2020 strategy, child poverty was part of our programme because we were part of the trio.

The circle will continue with the Belgian presidency starting in that field. Like Carlos, we, too, regret that the strategy did not have a sub-target aimed at reducing child poverty. We considered setting a national child poverty sub-target, because we consider child poverty an important issue – although, as I said, I do not know about the outcome of that yet.

Besides child poverty, we want to put high on the agenda other vulnerable groups that are highlighted in flagship initiatives the 2020 strategy. Among them is youth unemployment. Our conference plans, which are not yet confirmed, include discussing that issue from various points of view. We also plan to have a conference on disabled people, which will very much depend on the outcome of the Belgian presidency. Of course, we would not like to repeat conclusions or

conference programmes that will be done. Therefore, we will concentrate on continuing the initiatives.

We also plan to hold an event related to the Roma, who form another vulnerable group that is not included directly in the 2020 strategy. However, quite a few initiatives in that field began under the previous presidency. Quite a lot was done under the Spanish presidency, and we want to continue that chain of events and keep that issue the focus of attention as much as possible.

The Chairperson:

Many thanks, Katalin, for your overview. We appreciate the restrictions, so to speak, that are placed on you because of the political situation with a new Government in place. We wish that Government well.

Your presidency will come immediately after the Spanish and Belgian presidencies. How much work and how much working together has there been in advance of that on issues such as social inclusion?

Ms Nagy:

As I said earlier, we worked very closely on the preparation of the trio presidency programme. In that respect the main issues will enjoy a sort of continuity. For instance, from the beginning we decided together that this year, which is devoted to the fight against poverty and exclusion, should not be just one European year; it should be prolonged. In that respect, we intend to pay attention to the continuation and evaluation of the outcome of the year. In respect of most of these fields, such as child poverty and disability, you might feel that we are repeating one another because we all think in the same way.

The Commission's working programme has already been developed. In that respect, there is a big difference between the various presidencies. It looks very much as though most of the new initiatives will occur in the time of the Hungarian presidency, so we pretty much have to concentrate on that. It may happen that we will not have the sufficient time, energy or meeting room to elaborate further on presidency-related priorities. However, we will see.

Right now, there are many uncertainties as to the timing and the ways in which the Belgian presidency can start to negotiate certain dossiers, or how they will come into hands of the

Hungarian presidency when its time comes. All of that makes the preparation for the presidency, especially its programming and timing, very difficult. However, that was the case with the Spanish presidency. We could tell that it had suffered from that quite a lot. We have also seen that our Belgian colleagues are working under extremely uncertain conditions in that respect as well. I guess that it will be the same under our presidency too.

Mr Molloy:

My question relates to the putting together of the partnership across the three presidencies. Has there been discussion about how the Commission can engage with regional assemblies and how that will develop in the future?

Ms Nagy:

I have to admit that that dimension does not fall within my competence. Had I known about that question in advance, I would certainly have brought with me a respected colleague who is engaged in regional issues. I do not want to improvise an answer to that; I am sorry.

Mrs D Kelly:

Thank you, Katalin, for your presentation. When working with the European Commission, to what extent can a presidency shape the development of a policy?

Ms Nagy:

That is a tricky question because the relevant commissioner is also Hungarian. Of course, there is always some room to manoeuvre. That is the same for every presidency, regardless of the nationality of the commissioner, which, in this case, is a coincidence. Member states must be aware of forthcoming dossiers on issues that they may view as somewhat delicate. They can choose whether they want to manipulate that dossier somewhat or go the other way just to avoid that. That has not yet happened in my field. However, when it came to the question of a dossier related to the labour and the health and safety of seafarers, we were not enthusiastic about dealing with that because Hungary is landlocked and not best-placed to debate such an issue. Of course, if we have to deal with such things, we will.

Mr Elliott:

Thank you for the presentation. Regarding social inclusion, have you identified any areas or vulnerable groups that you may want to target? I ask that in light of Hungary's experience.

Ms Nagy:

The category of vulnerable groups must be revisited because, in the current crisis, it is becoming a relative and changing phenomenon. There are some classic categories, such as the Roma population, that are very relevant to us. In that respect, we would like some continuity in the existing — not necessarily European Community — initiatives, because the main characteristics of such initiatives go on very much at member-state level. However, we would like to give greater visibility to the Roma.

Young people comprise another group that is not classically recognised, but it should be, given the current economic crisis. It includes the unemployed youth, young people who are starting out and fresh graduates. We would also like to concentrate on that group. That does not mean that people with disabilities would not be part of our programme. At the same time as expecting the Commission to publish the new disability strategy, we would like to concentrate on the youth issue. However, because Belgian presidency is focusing so much on that, we will have to see how that will take shape and be implemented, because we do not want to duplicate its actions.

The Chairperson:

That completes the Committee's evidence session. We sincerely thank you, Katalin, for the information that you have provided, and we wish the people of Hungary and the Hungarian presidency every success in the future. You are, of course, welcome to join the Committee for lunch.

Members, that completes the evidence session at this special meeting in Brussels. I thank all the contributors who gave evidence and answered our questions and those who organised this morning's very successful event.