



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister  
and deputy First Minister

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

European Issues: Briefing by Irish Minister of  
State for European Affairs

16 October 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)  
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Alex Attwood  
Mr Leslie Cree  
Ms Megan Fearon  
Mrs Brenda Hale  
Mr Alex Maskey  
Ms Bronwyn McGahan  
Mr Stephen Moutray  
Mr George Robinson  
Mr Jimmy Spratt

**Witnesses:**

Mr Brian Cahalane	Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Ireland
Mr Paschal Donohoe	The Minister for European Affairs, Republic of Ireland

**The Chairperson:** We welcome Paschal Donohoe and Brian Cahalane, who is from the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin. Gentlemen, you are very welcome. As we were saying, we had the pleasure of Lucinda Creighton's company a couple of times over the past 12 months or so. Congratulations on your appointment. I invite you to make some brief opening remarks to the Committee.

**Mr Paschal Donohoe (The Minister for European Affairs, Republic of Ireland):** Chairman, thank you very much for your welcome and for the opportunity to speak to you all this afternoon. I want to make some opening comments about why I am here and then address my comments to three different themes.

The first theme is the role of our presidency of the Council of the European Union and the North/South dimension that we sought to bring to the presidency. The second theme that I would like to offer some comments on is the role of Parliaments within the union at the moment, particularly in the context of the fact that I spent nearly eight years as a member of the European Affairs Committee in the Oireachtas. The third theme that I will comment on is the debate that is beginning to develop on the future of the European Union and the role of the United Kingdom and Ireland within that.

Before I go into those three points, I just want to say how glad I am to be here. As I was explaining to some of your colleagues over lunch, in a former life, I used to spend an awful lot of my working time in

Belfast, but this is my first opportunity to come to Stormont and to address you formally. I am doing this very early in my time as a new Minister for two reasons. The first reason is that our Government attach gigantic and strategic importance to the North and to peace and progress within it. In whatever way I can, I want to show support and look to develop that in any way possible, no matter how small. The second reason is that I believe it is very important that I, as Minister for European Affairs, take the opportunity to respect and engage with the Assembly and the Committee here, given your interest in Europe and the work that I understand you are doing on the role of the Committee and, indeed, given how your Assembly overall might engage with Europe and its institutions.

With those opening comments out of the way, I want to spend a couple of minutes speaking about our presidency of the union, which finished a number of months ago. We are very proud of how everything went with the presidency. We are proud on two different levels. The first one is that many different policy areas fell to the Irish presidency to progress, and we are very satisfied with the strong progress that we were able to make on areas such as the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, and the success we had in managing to substantially advance and virtually conclude negotiations on the overall budget for the union; in other words, the progress that was made on the multi-annual financial framework. The most notable area in which we managed to make progress was the work on the banking union, which I know you will have heard much about and be aware of. The president played a role in advancing significant parts of that to where they are now, and we hope and believe that that will be of great value to people on this island, not to mention people across Europe. We are, I hope, entitled to derive some satisfaction from the progress that we made there.

It was also very important for us that we worked hard to embrace and develop the North/South dimension of the presidency not, I should say, just for the sake of it, but, more particularly, because of the role that that could play in ensuring that we delivered a presidency that benefited everybody. I just want to give you some very concrete examples of that. I want to acknowledge the strong role that officials in the Assembly and across the Executive played in supporting and working with the Departments from Dublin to move the presidency forward. I point to the fact that we were glad to extend an invitation to all Ministers from the North to attend any ministerial gathering that took place in and across Dublin during the presidency, and we were very glad to see that those invitations were taken up. We know that the Ministers who attended found them of use. I acknowledge the fact that the Northern Ireland office in Brussels was used to host a number of very important meetings. I hope that that sends out very clear signals to the countries that we engage with about the way in which we want to cooperate and work together; it was a very practical example of that. I was involved in parliamentary assemblies that took place during the presidency. We were glad to extend an invitation to the relevant Assembly Committee, and we were delighted that members attended and found it of benefit.

In considering the issue of delivery in the presidency and the things that we wanted to achieve, we attributed a lot of importance to ensuring the agreement of the Peace programme in the multi-annual financial framework (MFF) negotiations that I mentioned earlier. That was a real priority for us, and in an account that I gave to the Oireachtas on the success of the presidency, it was one of the issues that I highlighted as being very important to us. We strongly understand that what benefits the communities that you represent directly and indirectly benefits us too. We were very pleased to see a special allocation put in place in the MFF for that. I also want to acknowledge that the UK Government have now indicated that they are going to provide an additional €50 million from their regional development fund to support that.

I also want to acknowledge the focus of the new INTERREG programme, which looks at the regions in the United Kingdom. It is looking to progress things that we hope and know will be of benefit to many communities there.

The second theme that I want to touch on is the role of Assemblies and Parliaments in the European Union at the moment and the work that is taking place in the European Union. First and foremost, as a TD, a Member of a Parliament, and as someone who has spent a lot of time thinking about and debating these things and working on them in a Committee exactly like this one, I am very conscious that, because of the gigantic change that has taken place in the European Union since the crisis took off, we have seen new arrangements come into place such as the passage of the fiscal stability treaty. It lays down in law extremely strict deadlines and targets for the deficit and debt targets of individual countries, as you will all know.

For quite a while I have been trying to get my mind round all the names and acronyms that things are accorded. There is the so-called six-pack and the so-called two-pack. You will all be familiar with those; they refer to how budgets are developed in different countries. That has two really important

consequences for Parliaments and Assemblies of any kind. The first — I speak off the back of my time in the EU Affairs Committee at home — is the real importance of trying to ensure that parliamentarians and Members of Assemblies are independently plugged into and aware of what is happening in Europe and that they have the opportunity to directly engage with European institutions regardless of anything else. As a Government, we are very conscious of that because of the second consequence, which is the role and prominence that institutions such as the European Parliament have now acquired. I know that you will all be familiar with that from your own political parties and the work that happens there.

Because of the passage of the Lisbon treaty and now, more particularly, the operation of that treaty, the European Parliament has gained an awful lot of additional capacity and power in areas. One of the things that we learned during our presidency was the necessity of investing an awful lot of time physically in the Parliament, dealing with MEPs and recognising the powers that they now have on co-decision making and in other areas. That is something that we are thinking about now in order to develop that into something that we can action; we are beginning to look at and rethink how the Oireachtas engages with European matters. We think that we have made a lot of progress on that recently, but we are conscious of the fact that we need to evaluate that and see how we can strengthen it.

I will conclude on a third area, which is the debate that is developing around the United Kingdom's terms of membership of the European Union. As I address that point, I should make it very clear that we absolutely recognise and appreciate the right of any country to discuss or debate its membership or terms of membership of the European Union. That is clearly its sovereign right. We do it all the time via referenda, which we have frequently, so we completely understand the right and the ability to do the same. We seek to play no role in that or be anything but respectful of it.

Alongside that, we are very clear that we believe that the European Union is a far stronger place for having the United Kingdom within it. We and the United Kingdom have a very strong agreement and work together on a large number of areas in relation to issues such as the common market and many other policies that we both believe to be very important. Alongside that, what Ireland will put great focus on, now and in the future, is our continued strong membership of the European Union. We see it as something that has allowed our country to make a contribution and that, in turn, has made a contribution back home to us.

In the debate that is ensuing — although, as I said, we completely recognise the right of a country to have that — I should also say that we want to see the United Kingdom stay within the union. We would also like to see a debate take place that recognises the very strong, multi-dimensional impact of any decision that the UK might make overall that recognises the role of Northern Ireland and that recognises the needs of the North. That is something that we would like to see happening in any debate as and when it takes place.

I have just tried to touch on a number of different themes in my address. I want to conclude where I began by saying how happy I am to be here. Earlier, Chairman, you mentioned the appearance of my predecessor in front of the Committee. That is something that, where appropriate, I would like to continue. That is all just indicative of the very high value that we place on all that has been achieved in the North and the strong commitment we have to supporting and developing that in any way possible. I will end on that. Thank you for the opportunity to address you. I am in your hands, Chair, and those of your Committee members.

**The Chairperson:** Minister, thank you very much for your very informative remarks. I will start on the big picture. Obviously, in the last week, there were major speeches by the Taoiseach and others on how you are coming out of the financial, the economic and, arguably, the constitutional, crisis and into a position where, clearly, the United Kingdom Government feel that the way forward is for them to renegotiate, to some extent, with a view to a referendum on future engagement with Europe. I hear you saying that you respectfully stand back from that —

**Mr Donohoe:** Absolutely.

**The Chairperson:** — but it has to impact on the Republic of Ireland, so will you not, de facto, have to take positions as that process plays out?

**Mr Donohoe:** Thank you, Chairman, for that question. The way that the process you have outlined is proceeding is that the Government in the United Kingdom are proceeding with what they refer to as a

balance of competency review. They are looking to publish a whole range of reports regarding the nature of the interaction between the UK and the EU. We have decided, as nearly all European Union countries decided, not to make a submission to that, for the reasons that I outlined earlier. Our view overall is that we will just need to see what is the final, settled view of this Government and any future Government regarding what they want to do. We know, from referenda and the run-up to those, how important they are for a country, and, as I said again and again, we want to be respectful of that. Until the balance-of-competency review is complete, and until we know what any future Government will do regarding their relationship with the European Union, it would not be appropriate for us to do that.

In the interim, we will continue to articulate the point that I have made, which is that we want the UK within the EU because we think that that is positive for everyone. Alongside that, we view our future as being very much involved in the European Union and involved in all of the political and economic integration that that involves.

**The Chairperson:** I want to ask two specific questions, if I may, Paschal. You mentioned the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels during your presidency. What is your assessment of the usefulness of that office?

**Mr Donohoe:** Do you mean its role during the presidency?

**The Chairperson:** No, generally.

**Mr Donohoe:** I do not wish to comment on the role and operations of an office that I am not involved in. I can, however, make a general comment on your point, Chairman, given the amount of time that I now spend in Brussels. Two things really strike me that perhaps might be relevant to what you said. First, the huge amount of additional capacity and influence that the institutions in Europe have acquired over the past five years means that it is very important for any country to have strong involvement in it.

Secondly, I have spent a lot of time dealing with our permanent representative there — in other words, our ambassador — and I have seen the scale of the operation that we have there. When I say scale, this is all within the parameters of the economic difficulty that we are managing and so on. It is very important to have the ability to engage across all policy areas out there and then to be able to ensure that information flows back to whoever can make the most use of it. I emphasise that point because, although Brussels may be another physical place in the sense that it is not here or in Dublin, we are all very much involved in the work that goes on out there, and it all has an impact on us. Your ability to be involved in that work depends, first, on knowing about it and, secondly, having the people and the expertise in place to be able to engage with it. For example, during our presidency, our permanent representative, the facilities that we had there and the number of people whom we had there were indispensable to us.

**The Chairperson:** Finally from me, the final composition of Peace IV is €150 million from Europe and €50 million —

**Mr Donohoe:** — from the United Kingdom.

**The Chairperson:** Is that it?

**Mr Donohoe:** It is funny that, at every meeting that I go to at the moment, whether in my constituency or any place else across the country, when the issue of money is brought up, it is always said that it is great that we have made progress in this area but is it possible to make any more progress? All I will say is that that €150 million was a very significant and hard-won achievement on behalf of all of us. Our priority now is to get plans in place to ensure that it is spent and spent well.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thank you for your presentation, Paschal. It is great to have you here. I believe that Northern Ireland and its citizens benefit immensely from North/South cooperation and, indeed, from membership of a strong European Union, so we are glad to have you here with us. I also have a question on the European peace and reconciliation programme, Peace IV. The budgets were mentioned, and you mentioned the need to spend those wisely. What do you think the key issues are that the programme needs to address, and what are the key outcomes that it needs to achieve?

**Mr Donohoe:** There are two things that are very important regarding any spending line or project that is achieved with the European Union. I will make these points broadly, because they refer to absolutely everything, not just the Peace programme money. I am struck by the huge amount of effort that can go into negotiating a certain amount of money or a fund. So, the first point is that, once the funding is agreed and in place, it is so important that the money and plans go out promptly for investment. The MFF will be in place for a number of years, so I urge everyone who is involved in it to apply the same urgency as was applied to getting agreement for the money to investing it in the way that was intended.

The second point, which is an important dimension, Chris, concerns the transparency in how that money is spent generally. I am not making this comment at all about the Peace programme, but whenever funding has been achieved for a particular reason, we have all been very good at demonstrating that the money is being spent exactly in the way that it was intended. I make those comments about any agreement that is in place for European Union funding. The degree of examination and auditing of that money that goes on is extensive. That is appropriate, because after all, it is our money or our neighbours' money that is being spent, and we owe it to all of us to make sure that that is done well.

**Mr Lyttle:** How can governments and Parliaments stimulate wider public engagement in and awareness of European affairs?

**Mr Donohoe:** That is a great question, and we are also grappling with. I can give you what I think is the answer, but I would have to give it in the knowledge that we have to continue to look at how we are doing and see how we can improve it.

There are three very important elements, the first of which is that it is important to give people comprehensive information about Europe and to allow them to make up their minds about it. I am a very strong supporter of Ireland's membership of the European Union and how we have benefited from it. I think that Europe has benefited from the membership of small countries such as ours. However, I am not blind for a moment to all the difficulties and problems that we face; in fact, I have been acutely aware of them over the past number of years, and particularly now.

I think that it is very important that we find ways of giving people information about what Europe is and how it works and then simply allow them to make their minds up about whether they support it as it stands or whether they want to see a change in the future.

Secondly, it is important to look at how we engage in Europe in primary and secondary schools. However, we should not try to educate anyone about particular political views of Europe or anything like that. We should allow them to understand the European Union's broad history, where it stands culturally and how all the different institutions in it work. We have a programme at home called the Blue Star programme, which is focused on primary schools. It gives young boys and girls as much opportunity as possible to learn about all the different countries in Europe and the European Union, the different cultures and some idea of how they cooperate. I think that that is very important, and we are seeing the benefits of that at home.

The third very important element, although I have no influence whatsoever over it, and nor should I, is the role of the media and how they report on and talk about Europe. Whenever any of our media devote any kind of time to simply reporting what is happening across Europe and give any kind of view on it, that is very helpful and important in spurring on debate and understanding about how it works. As I said, however, I have no influence over that, nor would I seek to.

**Mr Maskey:** You are very welcome, Minister, and thank you for your comments so far. I look forward to further engagement with you and your representatives. There are a couple of questions that I would like to ask, the first of which is actually quite important. We recently had a representative of the British Government here. Obviously, as you would expect, I am a great advocate of people having the right to determine their own future in an independent fashion, so good luck to the people in Britain who want to decide their future in Europe. However, we here in the North are in a different category, in a way. People right across this island endorsed the Good Friday Agreement. To their credit, the British Government representative, if I remember correctly, recognised that, whatever view they will take on Europe, the Good Friday Agreement is an internationally binding treaty between the Irish Government and the British Government on the North. That means that there are obligations that will pertain here, whatever decisions British people come to.

I would just like some assurance that your Government are focused on that. I am not asking you to outline any direct discussions that you have been having with the British Government, but there are clearly mutually important issues that affect both Governments and how they take forward their responsibility for the people here across the North, and that is without anybody's particular political viewpoint, constitutionally or otherwise. It is a treaty that is co-sponsored by both Governments, so I would like your comment on that.

The other point concerns something that you referred to, Paschal, in your remarks on the work that was done, particularly during the Irish presidency, with Ministers and Departments here, along with your own in the Twenty-six Counties. I am interested in issues on cross-border European funds and different types of arrangements. Obviously there are quite a lot of policies and treaties on cross-border matters. Can you elaborate in any fashion how successful or otherwise those engagements were during the past year, particularly during the presidency?

**Mr Donohoe:** I will just kick off on your first comment on the Good Friday Agreement by assuring you of the complete recognition that we have of that treaty and the involvement that we have had in it to date. In many ways, that is a very good example of very particular kind of debate and discussion that we will hopefully see across the coming years here. That debate may be about membership of the European Union. It is very important to ensure that everybody's voice will be heard in that debate, because it will be a very important discussion and we are clearly aware of the different impacts that it could have. I am struck by the fact that a hugely important debate is taking place on this at the moment and that the situation could change. Chair, you referred to developments that have taken place over the past number of weeks. I want to ensure that, as we begin to consider the impact that it will have on us, other parties do the same. We are co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement. We are aware of all our treaty obligations, and we obviously want to ensure that they flourish and benefit in the best way possible.

Your second question asked me about the cross-border cooperation that has happened. I am struck by the areas of organic cooperation that have happened that have almost been separate to all the institutional stuff that we have talked about so far. I look at the common interest and awareness now that is taking place on agriculture — I think that that is a great example. There is an awareness of the agricultural needs of many of the communities that you all represent. I look at the cooperation that is going on between Letterkenny Institute of Technology and the University of Ulster. I also look at how our two tourism markets can develop together and at what is happening there. We touched on that briefly. Anyone who flies into Dublin and spends any kind of time around there at all will come up to see the science quarter, the Titanic Quarter and so on. I think that that kind of organic cooperation is mutually beneficial to all the communities that are involved.

I keep coming back to the work that has been done on the Peace programme. That was a huge priority for us during the presidency. We worked very hard on it as the people who were chairing the MFF negotiations. The people who are involved in it will decide this, but we want to see that money spent in a way that will benefit absolutely everyone.

**Mr Attwood:** Minister, I apologise that I was not able to attend the lunch earlier. I acknowledge that the Irish presidency of the European Union was a very powerful one, and it is practice that some of the most successful presidencies have been those that the Irish state led. You were far too modest, of course, when you spoke about what all of us have done to secure moneys for a new Peace programme. There would not be a new Peace programme if it had not been for the Irish Government's efforts, because there was very little effort from the London Government. Although they may now have come in with some money, which I welcome, let us be very clear that it was the Irish Government that led and won that argument. People in this room and elsewhere backed them, but the London Government did not back them very much.

Moving on to my questions, it would, first, be very useful if you could outline the internal structures in Irish government Departments that maximise funding opportunities from Europe. We have to learn very quickly not only about how the Irish Government reach into Europe but how they structure, in their Departments, opportunities to draw down funding. FP7 is the best example. Dublin had an aspiration of €600 million for the drawdown of FP7 funds and will get close to €900 million. The amount of money drawn down from FP7 in the North will be about £50 million. A lot of that is because of how you internally structure Departments to maximise funding opportunities through FP7. So, it would be useful to know how that is done and whether we can duplicate that up here.

The second question is simple. How much time do you spend in Europe? There might be something in that about how much time we, at a political level, should spend in Europe. Thirdly, I acknowledge

what is meant by "organic cooperation" between North and South, but as you will know, a review of North/South institutions is ongoing. It has been ongoing for six years and has yet to report to the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), six years after that was meant to be done. At the NSMC meeting that was held in July, it was agreed that that review would bring recommendations to the December meeting of the NSMC. So, besides what is organic, and given that there is a formal review of what has been achieved to date by North/South institutions and what might be achieved in the future, can you give us an assurance that, from the Irish Government's point of view, recommendations will be brought forward, six years later, to the NSMC meeting in December?

**Mr Donohoe:** I will kick off and address each of those in turn, starting with the second question about time spent in Europe. It has changed for me significantly since I was appointed as a Minister. As it stands, I spend half of every week doing my work in Europe and in different institutions. I do not want to sound glib at all in making this point, Alex, but, of course, I say that in the framework of all of us, here and elsewhere, being in Europe, as you well know. I know that you were talking very specifically about how much time I spend representing Ireland's case and our interests in Europe. As it stands, the way that it is is what it will be. As I stay in the role a bit longer and complete a set of initial contacts, it will diminish a bit. I have to say that my family certainly hopes so. It is a very significant time commitment, and it is one that the Taoiseach absolutely expects me to make. Similarly, as you are aware, all our Ministers are involved in ministerial gatherings and sectoral councils. There is a very strong expectation that the Minister will always attend those gatherings, and they use them as an opportunity with colleagues when they are there.

On your point about funding, it is reflective of how we look to engage in Europe full stop, and the funding consequence comes out of that. A couple of very specific structures are in place, probably the most important being that all European affairs are now being run out of the Department of the Taoiseach. So, the people who were in the sections of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and who were involved in dealing directly with all the different European institutions and with the consequences and knock-on effects of those dealings on our relationships with all the member states are now run directly out of that Department. That is a very significant change that we have made, and it has had a very big impact. A few different structures are in place that have come out of that. All Departments have EU affairs coordinators who are very senior officials and whose job it is to engage with and track the quality of the relationship and engagement that we have with European institutions and how we are doing there.

There are then two separate bodies. One looks at the overall position regarding how we are doing and any particular opportunities in the long to medium term. There is a second group, which I chair, called the engagement group, and that looks at how we are dealing with issues such as our engagement with Parliament and with the European Parliament. It looks at issues such as transposition of directives and infringements, which is the real nitty-gritty stuff. Every single Department is represented on that group. I chair it, and I am supported by a group of key officials from the Department of the Taoiseach. So, there are a lot of structures in place for it. I say all that with a very clear note of humility, because, for everything that you do, there are always opportunities to do it better. We are trying to get back to what we used to be able to do very well, but, even as we do, I am conscious that there are still many improvements that we want to make.

**Mr Attwood:** And my third question?

**Mr Donohoe:** Excuse me; I am sorry, I know that it sounds as though I deliberately did not answer the question. That question was about the St Andrews Agreement. I will pass your comments back to our Government. I believe that you were referring to the review on the term of reference 1. That is now complete, and I understand that it will be progressed soon. I also understand that there are considerations and questions about the work programme for terms of reference 2 and reference 3. I understand that each of those is about the current and future opportunities that could be taken advantage of through North/South cooperation. We are supporting the work on putting together a work programme on that. Obviously, the operation of the St Andrews Agreement and the bodies around that fall into the Tánaiste's area, rather than mine. I will pass your comments back.

**Mr Attwood:** I appreciate your bringing that back to the Tánaiste. My only comment is that there was an express agreement at the July NSMC meeting, and I look forward to that express agreement being honoured by both the Dublin and Northern Governments.

**Mr Cree:** This question is a little more on the macro level, Paschal. Forty years ago, we joined an economic community, and now we have something quite different. I read Barroso's comment that:

*"political union needs to be our political horizon",*

This is, perhaps, the root of all the difficulties. He went on to talk about Europe doing "big things" in a big way and small things in a "smaller" way. Is there any evidence of his getting out of the smaller areas, where Europe can be argued to be interfering in all sorts of minutiae?

**Mr Donohoe:** The first area is an interpretation of the membership of the European Union on which I would respectfully take a different view. So, if you look at the Treaty of Rome and some of the instruments that were there at the very start, you see that they talked about ever-closer union. That inevitably has political consequences. As important as the European Union single market and common market are, they do not equal all of the union; there is so much more that is also part of it. I know that we have directly benefited from it through our engagement and membership, but we have also benefited from the opportunity to try to influence it.

That leads directly to your second question. You accurately quoted what he said about doing the "big things" bigger and the small things "smaller". We have learned a bitter lesson from this, but the best possible example that I can give of the big things being done bigger relates to the banking union, where we have seen again and again that, because banks exist across borders, because their funding is drawn from across borders and because their operation crosses border, managing and regulating them effectively involves a cross-borders response. That is very much what the banking union is all about. It has made a lot of progress towards setting up, but a lot more work clearly needs to be done on that. The multi-annual financial framework is another example of that. I think that it is seven times bigger than the post-World War II Marshall plan. So, that is a great example of Europe doing the big things well.

Doing the small things smaller is a difficult one to answer, to be honest. The reason for that is that Europe ends up getting involved in a lot of the small things that you referred to, again correctly, because member states have given it the power to do it. It is all about trying to create a level playing field and a more open community within which small countries such as mine, which is an island off the edge of Europe, can win. That said, the refrain that you just gave is one that I hear again and again from my colleagues across other member states. I am also conscious that we need to be able to demonstrate to the people who I represent and to those who you represent that, if Europe is getting involved in something that looks small, we are able to say why it is getting involved and why it is to their benefit. If we cannot give that answer, it should not be there. That is what subsidiarity is meant to be all about, of course. It is meant to be about saying that the things that are best left to local communities and local people should be done by them. The things that are best done by national governments should be done by them, and Europe should do the really big stuff.

**Mr Spratt:** Welcome, and thank you for your presentation. I know that there has been a lot of lobbying from our Department for Regional Development (DRD) for funding from the TEN-T funding. Are you aware of any North/South discussions that have taken place on the transport network and, indeed, of any east-based discussions on the A75? You will recognise that a lot of transportation on the island leaves through Belfast or Larne ports and then uses the A75. I just wondered whether you are aware of any discussions between your jurisdiction and Northern Ireland, and, indeed, with Edinburgh, about the A75 and that general transport network for cargo and trade. That is obviously a big issue, and there is very considerable funding available for it over the next number of years.

**Mr Donohoe:** I will be honest with you and say that I am not fully aware of the Edinburgh dimension that you acknowledged, but if you wish, I can certainly come back to you on it.

On the other dimensions that you mentioned, the answer is very much so. I know that my colleague the Minister for Transport, Leo Varadkar, has said that, when we can afford it — if you understand all that — we want to support the development of the strongest and best possible North/South transport links for the simple reason that it is an absolute win-win. It would benefit anybody who uses them and the communities in both jurisdictions. From hearing the Minister talk about these things in the Dáil and in Committee, I know that he has given a commitment that, where it is possible within his current funding, he will prioritise that and look to work on it. I know that he participates in discussions about that at the North/South Ministerial Council. I will update my colleagues on this discussion and will definitely acknowledge your point. Do you have any specific questions or issues about particular roles?

**Mr Spratt:** It requires two member states to collaborate, if you like, to get the funding. I think that you hit the nail on the head when you said that it would have tremendous benefits. Any funding for any of

those issues would benefit transportation and the onward connection with Europe. I know that the Department here has done very considerable work on that, and I am aware that work has been done with your Minister. I think that funding for the A75 would benefit this entire island and, obviously, Scotland as well. So, I think that it is worth playing for that at every available opportunity.

**Mr Donohoe:** I will tell you what I will do: I will emphasise again the overall support that we have for doing this, because it is of joint benefit to the people. I have noted the particular roles and projects that you referred to. I will come back to you with a specific answer on that and give you an update on where it stands at the moment.

**Mr Spratt:** Thank you, Minister.

**The Chairperson:** Paschal, thank you very much for your time. I know that we have delayed you longer than you might have liked, but we really appreciate your and Brian's time and input.

**Mr Donohoe:** I thank members for their questions. I just emphasise that my hand of cooperation is very firmly open to all of you. I would like to meet up with you, when it is appropriate, to keep you abreast of what I am doing. That is why I wanted to get up as early during my term as I could. I think that I will meet some of you again next Monday when I address the plenary session of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA). In my address, I will acknowledge that I was here and how important this kind of cooperation is. So, again, thank you very much for your time. I am sorry that the weather was so bad on my arrival. One of you remarked, probably quite accurately, that I appear to have brought it with me.

**The Chairperson:** If so, would you take it back?

**Mr Donohoe:** If I have, I hope that I can leave it here. *[Laughter.]* Thank you all very much.