

Statement by Bertie Ahern on the outcome of the Brussels European Council (16 December 2003)

Caption: On 16 December 2003, Bertie Ahern, Irish Prime Minister, expresses his disappointment at the failure of the Brussels European Council, held on 12 and 13 December, while remaining confident at the chances of an agreement on the Constitutional Treaty being reached during the forthcoming Irish Presidency of the European Union.

Source: Statement by the Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern, T.D.. [ON-LINE]. [Dublin]: Department of the Taoiseach, [20.06.2005]. Available on <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/index.asp?locID=365&docID=1713>.

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URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/statement_by_bertie_ahern_on_the_outcome_of_the_brussels_european_council_16_december_2003-en-87dd8866-646d-4289-80e9-1187bc6b892f.html

Publication date: 05/09/2012

Statement by the Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern, T.D. (16 December 2003)

I attended the European Council and the Intergovernmental Conference in Brussels on 12 and 13 December. I was accompanied by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Brian Cowen and the Minister for European Affairs, Dick Roche. The Minister for Finance, Charlie McCreevy attended the European Council meeting.

The Conclusions of the European Council have been laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas.

I also participated in the Extraordinary Tripartite Social Summit in Brussels on 11 December.

It was clearly disappointing that the Italian Presidency was not able to bring the Intergovernmental Conference to a definitive conclusion at the weekend. Like others, we had very much hoped that a final agreement would be possible. In the end, however, it became clear that the time was not ripe. A basis for compromise, in particular on the key issue of how to define a qualified majority, was not present. In those circumstances, there was a general sense that there was little to be gained from prolonging the meeting unduly.

As the next President of the European Council, I undertook to reflect, initially in conjunction with the Italian Presidency, and then to consult partners, with a view to bringing a report to the Spring European Council in March. I hope that in the light of our consultations it will be possible to have a better idea as to how and when we can move ahead. In the next couple of weeks, we will be considering how best to structure consultations. The whole Presidency team, and I personally, will be giving the highest priority to our IGC responsibilities.

As Presidency, on this issue, like on all others, Ireland will be even handed and open. In particular, we have repeatedly made clear that, on the question of the voting system, we could live either with the Nice arrangements or with the Convention proposals. Nationally, we could accept any reasonable compromise. Therefore, partners may be confident that we will be motivated only by a desire to build consensus.

While the voting system remains the most difficult and the most prominent issue, it is not the only question to be resolved. Good progress has been made during the past few weeks, including on issues of particular concern to Ireland. There also seemed to be an emerging consensus on most institutional questions, including the composition of the Commission and the Presidency. I made clear to Prime Minister Berlusconi where Ireland stood on the outstanding questions, emphasising our desire to be positive and constructive.

While I was pleased with the apparent direction of developments, and with the Italian Presidency's helpful approach to our key concerns, particularly in the areas of Justice and Home Affairs and European Security and Defence Policy, there will obviously be no final agreement on any of these issues individually until there is an overall deal. The Italian Presidency has expressed the view that its proposals should stand. Its good work remains the obvious basis for the final stages of the negotiations.

I have no doubt that there will be eventual agreement on a Constitutional Treaty. The open questions are exactly what the nature of the agreement will be and when it will happen.

At the weekend, there were many present who thought that the IGC was unlikely to finish in our Presidency. There was a strong sense that more time would be needed. Certainly, the situation is complicated by the electoral calendar, not least the European Parliament elections in June.

No Presidency can compel agreement if the political circumstances are not right. I am certainly not going to promise that the IGC will finish in our Presidency. But, equally, it would be premature to conclude that it will not. If there is good reason to believe, in the light of my consultations, that faster progress is possible, then I will spare no effort to achieve it. But it depends on the overall atmosphere and on whether everyone is ready to do a deal.

This is a setback, but it is not a crisis. Pending agreement on a new Constitutional Treaty and its subsequent

ratification the Union will continue to function on the basis of the current Treaties, as amended at Nice. There is a full programme of future work ahead of us, and much for the Union to do, at home and abroad, which does not depend on a new Treaty.

But, clearly, it would be preferable were agreement to be reached as soon as possible. There is a great deal in the current draft, as prepared by the Convention, which is not in dispute and which is clearly positive:

- a clearer statement of the Unions objectives and founding principles;
- greater certainty as to where its powers begin and end;
- the simplification of decision-making procedures;
- a greater role for national parliaments;
- the enhanced prominence of human rights;
- the prospect of greater coherence in the Unions external action; and
- reformed Presidency arrangements.

All of these aspects would contribute enormously to making the Union more effective in meeting the expectations of citizens and in responding to the internal and external challenges it faces.

It would also be good to resolve finally the debate about the Unions future institutional framework, which has now lasted for several years, from the time of the Amsterdam negotiations, and has been an ongoing source of tension and uncertainty within the Union.

So of course agreement at the weekend would have been highly desirable. But the Union has confronted difficulties before. It has always, united, overcome them. At a time when its core values of partnership and solidarity have never been more important, I am very confident that it will eventually succeed in this endeavour also even if it takes more time than we had hoped.

The meeting of the European Council that preceded the IGC was very productive. As the Conclusions show, the current internal and external agenda of the European Union is both broad and diverse. All of the issues on the table will have a significant impact on our Presidency.

Today, I will highlight a number of issues of particular significance for our Presidency.

The European Council endorsed the European Action for Growth Initiative. This initiative by the Italian Presidency has enabled the European Union to mobilise investment in areas which will reinforce competitiveness, growth and infrastructural development. This Initiative is very important for the European Union and will be carried forward by Ireland during our Presidency.

As part of the Growth Initiative, the European Council noted progress on the Quick Start programme. The Quick Start list already includes two Irish projects, the Belfast-Dublin-Cork rail link and a motorways of the sea project for port infrastructure.

As the List remains open and dynamic, there is further potential to add projects. Two additional Irish projects the Cork-Dublin-Belfast Road project and the Ireland UK Electricity Inter-Connector have the potential to be added to the Quick Start Project List in the near future. We are also looking at possibilities in the broadband and research and development areas.

At the European Council last October, I expressed the concern that accounting practices can be obstacles to the implementation of infrastructural programmes. The European Union has now asked Member States

together with the Commission to act to address any such technical, legal, administrative and accounting obstacles in the implementation of infrastructural projects.

This includes the current review by Eurostat of the treatment of public/private partnerships for national accounts purposes. I am very pleased that this concern has begun to be addressed and that there is an appreciation of the need for a considered approach to removing the other obstacles.

Together with growth and competitiveness, employment will be a major priority at the next European Council in the spring. A key element in our consideration of employment will be the recent report of the Task Force on Employment. This report was discussed at the Tripartite Summit with the European Social Partners in Brussels on 11 December in which I participated.

Following the Tripartite Summit, I had a meeting with the former Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Wim Kok, who chaired the Task Force. We agreed that if we want to reach our employment goals for 2010 it will be important for the European Union to make the structural changes required.

Also at our meeting, we reached agreement on a range of sites for certain European Union agencies. These include the European Food Safety Authority which will have its seat in Parma, the Maritime Safety Agency in Lisbon and the European Chemicals Agency in Helsinki. Deputies will recall that Heads of State or Government failed to agree these sites at Laeken in 2001.

As such, the agreement at the weekend is clear evidence that a temporary setback can be overcome. The Conclusions of the Heads of State or Government on this issue has been laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas.

The European Council also noted progress in the Justice and Home Affairs area including on the management of migratory flows, progress on establishing a European Border Management Agency and agreement on a number of measures in the fight against drugs.

At his request, I met Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey on 11 December prior to the European Council. I took the opportunity to convey to the Prime Minister the European Unions preference for a reunited Cyprus to join the European Union on 1 May, 2004. I also underlined that a settlement of the Cyprus problem would greatly facilitate Turkey's membership aspirations. This message was reiterated in the Conclusions of the European Council adopted the next day.

The European Council noted a range of foreign policy issues which will impact significantly on our Presidency including the European Security Strategy and the Declaration on Transatlantic Relations.

The European Security Strategy very much reflects the European Unions and Ireland's commitment to a comprehensive approach to security. It puts effective multilateralism, and in particular the UN, at the heart of the EU foreign and security policy.

As incoming Presidency, we will be responsible for the first phase of implementation of the security strategy and we will focus on effective multilateralism. Our aim is to give significant EU support to Kofi Annans UN reform process. We will also give priority to implementation of the EU-UN agreement on cooperation in crisis management.

The Declaration on Transatlantic Relations underlines the importance of the EU's relationship with the US, in particular. It emphasises that, acting together, the EU and the US can be a formidable force for good in the world. This will be a particular priority for us during the Presidency as will the proposed EU-US Summit during our term.

While we had a very successful European Council, it was disappointing that we did not reach agreement in the IGC on Saturday. The Irish Presidency will do all within its power to take the process forward. We may or may not succeed in fostering final agreement. But I can promise the House, and our partners, that we will

not fail for want of commitment or determination.

We will also, of course, focus on the other topics on the agenda, in particular the economic challenges facing Europe.

We will hold the Presidency at an exciting and challenging time for Europe. I am confident that we will make a real difference and deliver positive results.

Thank you.