

To initiate the new series of *International Talks* organized by the Language Learning Center of TH Köln, the Irish Ambassador to Germany, Mr. Michael Collins, delivered a talk on “Ireland in Europe – Managing the Brexit”, followed by a Q&A on May 12, 2017.

The Ambassador began his talk by taking a brief look at Irish history, thus elucidating the enormous impact Brexit will have on his country, which suffered so long from the Troubles in Northern Ireland. As a long-term member of the European Union, Ireland feels deeply committed to the European Union and is now strongly disappointed at the decision taken by British citizens to leave the EU.

Ireland in the “divorce” negotiations

On account of the geographic and cultural proximity to the UK and its relevance as Ireland's business and trade partner, Ireland is without doubt the member state of the EU which will be most immediately and most strongly affected by Brexit. Mr. Collins pointed out that it was of the utmost importance to maintain the Common Travel Area the two countries have which predates the membership of the EU by both countries in 1973. Moreover, the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is of great concern. Long a point of contention in the Irish Troubles, the border's significance was diminished on account of the EU and because of the peace brought about by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. According to the Ambassador, today many Irish are no longer aware of the border's existence. Now, however, it will gain new significance as a legal border of the EU. This, Mr. Collins insisted, must not result in a rekindling of old conflicts. Nobody wanted to see a return to the border of the past which was such a potent symbol of division and conflict. The peace process must continue at all costs. The Ambassador's words may well be taken as an appeal to the parties in the Brexit divorce negotiations; however, he expressed his satisfaction with the guidelines for the negotiations recently agreed by the EU as these clearly reflect the stipulations just mentioned. These were also endorsed by the EU negotiator, Mr. Michel Barnier, in his speech to the Irish Parliament last Thursday. To have this kind of support from EU partners is all the more important as the divorce negotiations need to protect the gains of the Good Friday Agreement and ensure good future relations between the EU and the UK.

Economic power in the making

Mr. Collins made it very clear that the Irish have a strong attachment to the European Union. But he also left no doubt that they have every reason to be proud of their own recent achievements, namely the way they dealt with the consequences of the economic crisis of 2009. In the Ambassador's words, Ireland has become a metaphor for speedy and efficient economic recovery. The Irish are on their way to full employment again, investor confidence has been restored, and the level of national debt is below the European average. Ireland, which was traditionally an economy based on agriculture, has found its way into the 21st century: pharmaceutical and high-tech industries as well as financial services are the new key pillars of the Irish economy today.

Nation-state and union of states

Asked to comment on Irish fiscal policy, Mr. Collins explained that deciding on tax rates was a matter of national sovereignty within the European Union. Keeping tax rates low for foreign companies operating in Ireland was an important measure to help encourage industrial development but of course Ireland offered other advantages as well. However, the Ambassador expressed strong views on tax abuse and suggested international cooperation to counter it. He used the issue of fiscal policy to illustrate that, on the one hand, the national responsibility and sovereignty of the EU member states need to be retained, while on the other hand our common currency has to be protected, and he reminded us that ultimately, the European Union as a community of nations was worth defending.

In this regard, it was noteworthy that, in Mr. Collins' opinion, there was currently "no appetite for changing the Treaty", meaning that Brexit would most likely not lead to fundamental changes in the principles that form the current basis of the European Union's operations and activities. The EU should instead focus particularly on important issues as youth unemployment and creating equal opportunities for all member states. We also needed to work actively to protect human rights, including freedom of the press. The Ambassador also referred to the special responsibilities of the media and the importance of standards in the area of social media.

Current issues

When asked about the rise of right-wing political parties, Mr. Collins maintained that there was currently no strong extreme right in Ireland, but stressed the importance of not giving extremists any space anywhere in Europe.

As far as the quota of refugees coming into Ireland is concerned, the Ambassador explained that while his country had not joined the Schengen Agreement, Ireland accepted the EU quota for refugees proposed by the European Commission. Having said as much, he noted that Ireland, traditionally a nation of emigrants, was now very much a country that had accommodated many immigrants. Never before, he said, had Ireland been so multicultural and so multiethnic as it is today. Ireland had benefitted from immigration and immigration had helped Ireland's economy to grow.

This convincing and deeply moving talk, which showed Mr. Collins' personal engagement, is a clear commitment to a peaceful coexistence in a united Europe.