



Top EU officials say Brexit can turn into opportunity for Ireland – Shannon Foynes Port Company hosted seminar hears

Friday 18 May 2018: A leading EU official overseeing a key element of the CEF ‘Motorways of the Sea’ project has confirmed that Ireland will have increased funding opportunities under the programme after plans for it were rewritten to take into account of Brexit implications here.

Speaking at a seminar on ‘Understanding the Opportunities from the EU’, hosted by Shannon Foynes Port Company in Limerick today, European Coordinator for Motorways of the Sea Brian Simpson also told Irish ports and maritime officials “you’re pushing an open door with me”.

The “Motorways of the Sea” concept, which has significant funding available, aims to introduce new inter-modal maritime-based logistics chains in Europe, which should improve our transport organisation within the years to come.

And in another vote of support for Ireland, a second leading EU official, European Coordinator for the powerful TEN-T North Sea-Mediterranean Corridor and former Commissioner for Regional Policy Professor Peter Balazs, told the seminar that Ireland is a special case and solutions need to be found.

The conference was arranged following a discussion at a smaller gathering in Brussels last November, also organised by Shannon Foynes Port Company, at which EU officials were briefed about the opportunity that the Shannon Estuary – thanks to its deep waters - presents from not just an Irish but European perspective. Together with the risks presented by Brexit, today's seminar heard, there is a growing recognition of the opportunity that investment in maritime infrastructure can bring about for the region and country.

Said UK native Mr Simpson: “I think Ireland has an opportunity now to look to how we trade with the rest of Europe in a different way. They've been using the UK Landbridge as the main way into Europe. Now because of Brexit the answer is to go direct; Ireland to France,

Ireland to Spain, etc. Then you have an opportunity where you can start new routes into mainland Europe.”

The potential Brexit impact on Ireland, Mr Simpson said, led to him re-drafting his Motorways of the Sea programme: “Every coordinator has got to do a detailed work plan. I did one and I modified it to include peripheral regions because the peripheral regions in Europe were complaining bitterly that because they weren't core ports, they weren't able to facilitate Motorways of the Seas.

“That became more apparent with the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, which made Ireland a very big peripheral area that needed to be linked in. So, I altered my plan to say that Motorways of the Seas in future should include peripheral regions. And the reason the main reason for this was Ireland. That translates into more funding opportunities for Ireland.”

On funding opportunities, he said: “The reality for Ireland now is, in order to get EU money, you have to apply for it. You're pushing an open door with me. If you do not apply for the funding you will not get it, so please apply.”

Professor Balazs, meanwhile, stated that Ireland has sympathy from other EU nations. “Ireland enjoys a deep sympathy on behalf of all the rest of the EU member states because the leaving of the UK from the EU separates Ireland from the block, from the central part of the Union. In spite of all difficulties which would occur in current in this context of Brexit, I would qualify (this) as a back wind for Ireland which helps finding new solutions and maybe creating a special Irish case,” he added.

Shannon Foynes Port Company CEO Pat Keating said that having EU officials of such significance travel to Limerick for the conference reflected the new understanding of the opportunity that exists in the region from a national and European perspective. “This is a significant vote of confidence of the future role that Shannon Foynes Port Company has to play in the whole area of international trade for Ireland. We obviously have Brexit looming but we've been very encouraged by the support coming from Europe. Brexit is a disruptor but it is an opportunity for us also. What we're trying to do at Shannon Foynes Port Company is to actually bring about a new supply chain direct into continental Europe from this region, which by-passes obviously the UK land-bridge.

MEP Sean Kelly, who opened the conference, said that the opportunity that Shannon Foynes Port Company presents because of its deep waters is now dawning on the EU. “They were actually almost gobsmacked in Brussels at the potential of Shannon Foynes and that they haven't heard about it up until then. Now they are aware of it, they see it fitting in not just influencing something that will suit Ireland, but actually it is good for the entire European Union.”

MEP Kelly's parliamentary colleague Deirdre Clune was also present at the seminar. Closing the conference, she said: “This has been an excellent conference as we have a particular circumstance here in Ireland as an island nation but also now because of the potential Brexit impact. Peripherality should not be an obstacle for us and should not lead to a lack of competitiveness. Accessing funding to develop infrastructure to enhance our competitiveness is essential so having this event and the key officials in attendance is hugely beneficial. We now know where the opportunity is and we must go after it.”

Ends