Minister for Foreign Affairs Brian Cowen today addressed the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee on the current state of play regarding the IGC.

"Mr Chairman, Members of the Committee

I am delighted to be present here this morning and look forward to a valuable discussion about the current situation in the Intergovernmental Conference. I will set out briefly the Presidency's intentions and plans, and outline what has happened so far since last month's European Council meeting. But for me the most important aspect of this session is the opportunity to hear your views and to receive your advice and insights.

Clearly, in our planning for the Presidency, we took full account of the possibility that we would have to take forward the IGC. But, to be frank, we had hoped that it would be possible for final agreement to be achieved in December. That would have left us only with the important, but less complex, task of preparing the final text of the Constitutional Treaty for signature. Of course, a great deal of very good work was done under the Italian Presidency since the IGC began on 4 October, and I will say a little about this in a moment. But, as we all know, it was not possible to complete the IGC at that time.

The European Council therefore gave the Irish Presidency a mandate to consult with partners and to present a report to the Spring European Council, which will be held on March 25th and 26th. We take our responsibilities with the utmost seriousness and I can assure you that we are already fully engaged in this vitally important task.

Logically, our work falls into two parts. First of all, we must be sure that we fully understand the views and concerns of all our partners, and of all those concerned with the IGC, including of course the Parliament. We have to listen to what everyone has to say and, through active dialogue, tease out the exact nuances of their positions. We want to have available to us the most complete and the most accurate possible picture of the situation.
The listening phase is well under way. Already, the Taoiseach has spoken to many of his colleagues on the European Council. He has also begun to meet fellow Heads of State or Government, and has several more meetings scheduled over the coming weeks. For my part, I am also talking to and meeting with as many of my own Foreign Minister colleagues as possible. Supplementary contacts are also taking place at all appropriate levels through our system. Nor do I see this exercise as simply about ticking people's names on a list. I am sure that it is the start of a process of back and forth dialogue which will deepen as we try to achieve the maximum clarity by March.

Inevitably, bilateral contacts have a particular value in the current circumstances. But it is also very important that we continue to bear in mind that the IGC is a collective process. Finding agreement is a collective responsibility. For that reason, I have decided to have an initial informal discussion over lunch at next Monday's meeting of the General Affairs and External Relations Council - the first in our Presidency.

It will not be a formal meeting of the IGC. There will be no papers and I do not intend to draw any conclusions. But it will be an important signal that the work continues. It will give us an opportunity to exchange views about the best way to proceed. I want to make sure that everyone concerned has a chance to be present and so, in a departure from normal Council practice, I have, in addition to the Commission, invited the representatives of the Parliament, and of the three candidate countries, to be there. I look forward to their contribution.

The second and more complex phase of our work will be drawing conclusions from our contacts and preparing a report to the March European Council. It is at this stage premature to speculate about what it will contain. That will and must depend on what we learn over the coming period. But we intend to submit the fullest possible report. I very much hope that, in March, it will be possible to chart a more precise course for the IGC.

Indeed, I will go further. As the Taoiseach said last week in Strasbourg, if it emerges that there is a real prospect of achieving agreement during our Presidency, then we will not hesitate to seize that opportunity. I think it is clear that it is in the Union's interests for agreement to be reached sooner rather than later. Stalemate and delay serve nobody. The issues to be resolved will not change over time. In view of enlargement, and of the forthcoming elections to this Parliament, it would be far preferable for the Constitution to be completed and made known to citizens as soon as possible.

But, as Presidency, we are under no illusions about the complexity of our task. The issues to be resolved may be few in number but they are highly sensitive and difficult. Certainly last month there were very different perspectives on how to resolve them. Ireland can encourage progress, we can build mutual understanding, we can try to identify common ground: however, we cannot compel agreement, in the absence of the shared political will to achieve it. There is an obligation on everyone to think not only of their own interests, but of the collective interest of the Union as a whole.

In the past, moving forward has never been easy. But in the end we have always summoned the necessary energy, ingenuity and determination. Overcoming obstacles through compromise is the hallmark of the Union's way of working. Failure is not an option. Whether it be in this Presidency or later, we must succeed.

Moreover, disagreement over the outstanding issues, including voting in the Council, risks obscuring what we agree on. In particular, there is a danger that our citizens will turn away from a process which holds out great promise and significance. We should not forget the
quite exceptional work done by the Convention in preparing its draft. That draft continues to be the central basis of our work and I once again pay tribute to all who were involved - I know that some of the key figures are here today in this room. The Convention opened up the process of Treaty change and brought fresh perspectives to bear. We all - parliaments and governments alike - are accountable to our people, and the democratic authority of the Convention was underscored by the breadth of its membership.

The great bulk of what was proposed by the Convention has stood throughout the IGC and will continue to stand. I would stress the importance of many of its proposals. For example, the text clearly sets out the allocation of competences between the Union and the Member States, and the principles governing their exercise. It simplifies legal procedures and instruments. It creates a single legal personality for the Union. It enhances the role of this Parliament, and it also gives national parliaments an important part in the overall architecture.

By incorporating the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the draft enhances the prominence of human rights in the work of the Union. Its proposals on the creation of a single Union Foreign Minister and External Action Service should make the Union's external policies more effective and coherent.

All of you know this as well as, or better than, I do. But it is no harm to remind ourselves of the significance of what has been achieved so far, and of the prize which is on offer. Creating a Constitution is important in itself. But it is not an end in itself. What we want is a Union which is more responsive to the real needs and expectations of its citizens. More transparent and accountable in its procedures. Better able to promote the security of our people and to work for a just and peaceful world.

The Convention's report remains and will remain at the heart of the IGC's work. But as a matter of both legal and political reality Governments were obliged to look very carefully at it, and in particular at those aspects which would affect them most directly. In due course it will be our duty to seek national ratification, in some cases through referendums.

As I said earlier, the Italian Presidency made very considerable progress in resolving most of the points raised by Governments. The work done in the run up to the Naples Conclave in late November, and at Naples itself, was very productive. The paper prepared immediately in advance of the European Council was particularly valuable, and struck a very careful balance.

The basis of any negotiation is, of course, that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. And I know that there are aspects of the Italian Presidency's work which were not the subject of final consensus. Nevertheless, and while debate will continue, it would be very unfortunate and unwise, in my view, if we were not to maintain as far as possible the excellent progress which has been made.

In seeking to resolve those issues which are clearly outstanding, the Irish Presidency will be open, fair and balanced. We will listen to all views and work to accommodate them. We have no hidden agendas, no pet projects. We are determined that nobody will be able to question our even-handedness. We may, or may not, succeed. But we will not fail for want of effort, and I ask for your help."

ENDS