

**Ireland 40 years on:
The Benefits, Opportunities and Challenges of EU Membership**

SPEECH

by

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SESSION

'THE COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF NON- EUROPE'

1 February 2013

Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for your patience in listening to me for a second time today! I promise to do my best to say creative and stimulating things! Or to at least try to bring some proposals on how we could promote 'more Europe', for a better Europe. For ultimately, that is how I interpret the title of this session. And for a Europhile like myself, there is absolutely no doubt that the European Union has brought *enormous* benefits to European citizens, to Member States and to the entire world, in terms of peace, prosperity and security, but also in social, cultural and human terms. Unfortunately, many citizens are not aware of the extent or impact of the EU on their daily lives, which takes place in a myriad of ways. But one thing that we should all recognise and deeply respect is the contribution of the European project to peace. And if I can quote an extract from the speech of Mr Van Rompuy, President of the European Council, when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU in December: "War has become inconceivable. Yet 'inconceivable' does not mean impossible."

In 2013 it is not a question of war or peace, but we continue to face significant challenges. And although we can proudly say that the implosion of the Euro has been averted, nonetheless there is still a great deal to be done to strengthen the European project, at the political, economic and social level. For as I mentioned in my speech earlier this morning, the current triple crises have laid bare some less favourable human characteristics, which are usually hidden, but which tend to resurface in times of insecurity and crisis. Political extremism is one of them. And it is precisely in these difficult times that we must not only remember, but also act upon a very simple thought: the EU is not just the sum of 27 national positions and interests. No, a united Europe is a *political project* which is mutually reinforcing and stronger than the sum of its individual parts. The EU results from the free consent of States to share their sovereignty. But it requires a European spirit and commitment, a sense of community of destiny and like any union, it requires compromises.

And personally, I believe that in the long term, the economic crisis will strengthen Europe. It will make it more sustainable, more competitive and more cohesive. And progress towards a 'genuine economic and monetary union', if coupled with a social dimension, will mean that Europe will eventually emerge stronger. The problem is that it takes time. So even if today we are beginning to see the first signs of economic stability, there is still a long way to go until we will see growth and even longer until we will enjoy employment creation.

The future institutional architecture of the EU has a key role to play in this process. But if we create structures then we should ensure that they are sufficiently endowed financially to carry out their functions. For this reason I very much welcome the fact that in March the European Investment Bank will be re-capitalised by an additional 10 billion Euros. In contrast, the European Investment Fund is in my opinion very much under-capitalised. It needs much greater funding in order to be *able* to support European SMEs, at a time when banks are either unwilling or incapable to help them.

Of course, speaking about funding and of the 'cost of non-Europe', leads us directly to a discussion on the next seven year budget of the European Union. And clearly, we need to have a balanced and adequate EU budget which will be an instrument for growth and sustainability. We do not need an

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excessive budget, but we do need one which will allow the EU to carry out its role and commitments under the Lisbon Treaty.

And in order to manage this, one of the recommendations that was made in the EESC Opinion of which I was the co-author 'Towards an Updated Cost of non-Europe', was that there should be an *upward* movement of responsibility for policies to the EU level, a sort of pooling of responsibility. This could take place in several policy areas such as energy, research, taxation, social policy, customs and border security, etc. Now, I know that currently, the issue of upward or downward movement of responsibilities from the EU to Member States is a very delicate subject for some European countries. But it is crucial to remember that particularly in times of crisis, we need to take concrete steps towards significant reducing the enormous waste resulting from separate national budgets. For this reason, in our Opinion we argued that a joint management of certain policies would lead to significant increases in growth, competitiveness, job creation and poverty reduction.

And within this context, the European Commission should be urged to assess the cost of 'non-Europe' in all of its policy areas. Notably, the Commission should be called upon to evaluate the impact of 'non-Europe' on employment and growth. As a second step, the Commission should review the Europe 2020 Strategy and include new objectives and action plans for reducing these costs.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would now like to move onto the second part of my presentation, which will look at the role of citizens in the Europe of today and tomorrow. For after all, this is the European Year of Citizens and it is absolutely *crucial* that civil society and citizens become more engaged in Europe. After five years of austerity, increasing political extremism and anti-Brussels sentiment, it is imperative that we make the EU more visible, tangible, relevant and accessible to the lives of citizens. It is imperative that we develop further a *European* identity which would help citizens to recognise that investing in Europe is in their personal and national interest. And one way of doing this is to create a 'community of destiny' between Institutions, citizens and societies; between the nation-state and 'Europe'; and between European countries. Ultimately, citizens need to better understand the cost of 'non-Europe', of a Europe without the EU.

Last year, I was rapporteur on an EESC Opinion on the implementation of Article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty. This is of course the Article which formalises dialogue between the European Institutions, civil society and citizens. Article 11 even paves the way for the right of Citizens to initiate policies – the famous European Citizens Initiative. This Opinion is available on display so I will not enter into the details of the recommendations that were made. Suffice to say that we need to assess, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the involvement of civil society and of citizens in European policy making to date, and then we need to improve it! For it is my firm belief, that one way of remedying the perceived distance between 'Brussels' and Member States is through increased opportunities for participatory democracy and hence, accountability at the European level.

One simple idea that I included in my report on how to do this, was for national parliaments from our Member States together with the European Parliament to organise a joint event and agree on 5 key recommendations for Europe. In parallel the European Economic and Social Committee could

organise a similar event for civil society and working together we could forge the bridge between our citizens, the electorate and the elected. So we could jointly work towards a structured debate on our future, restoring both representative and participatory democracy, stimulating governments and European institutions to move Europe forward, which includes preparing the 2014 elections to the European Parliament.

Dear friends and colleagues, I have tried to touch upon various angles of this topic, which could help to explain why Europe is important, what we could improve and who the actors should be. All of us have a role to play in making Europe stronger, more effective and more cohesive. But to do so, we need the power of imagination and the strength of determination. So let us jointly strive for growth and equity. Let us jointly move Europe forward. Let us commit to a better Europe for and with our citizens!

Thank you for your attention.