

Address by the Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern T.D., to the Conference on: “ The Future of Europe – Uniting Visions, Values and Citizens” organised by the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice

Croke Park Conference Centre, Dublin, 27 September 2005

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a real pleasure to address this important Conference. I want to congratulate the organisers for their commitment to fostering a broad debate on the future of Europe.

I have circulated a written version of my full address to the Conference. I will now restrict myself to the key highlights.

The phrase “The Future of Europe – Uniting Visions, Values and Citizens” succinctly summarises the nature of the challenge facing the European Union and its Member States.

The European Vision

Amidst all the current difficulties in the EU, it is easy to forget the visionary nature of the European Union itself. The European Union was not forged through battle or conflict. It is not based around a single group regarding themselves as a nation. It does not correlate to any other form of federal or national government. The European Union is a unique political structure that has been uniquely successful in the last half century.

The EU is based on a voluntary pooling of sovereignty. The EU is founded on respect not on coercion. There are four main elements underpinning the EU’s success.

Firstly, the European Union is only open to states where democracy and the rule of law are a given. If one were to select one 70-year old citizen from each of the Member States, only two – the Irish person and the Swede, would have lived in a country which has not known dictatorship and foreign aggression during his or her lifetime. The European Union continues to make an essential contribution to the spread of democracy in Europe.

Secondly, the European Union has been based on economic cooperation amongst the Member States, supplemented by assistance and solidarity between them. We have built fair and transparent arrangements for the management of trade, for the regulation of industry, for the setting of minimum environmental and social standards and for the support of economic cohesion and agriculture.

Thirdly, the Union has crafted a common approach to the rest of the world. This approach has been built on development aid and fair and free trade, strong support for multilateral engagement and an increasing commitment to peace-keeping and support for humanitarian tasks.

Fourthly, and most importantly, Europe has progressively built strong and representative institutions. These institutions – the Commission, the Parliament and the European Court of Justice in particular - have ensured that Europe has developed on the basis of equality amongst the Member States.

It is in all of our interests that this step-by-step approach to building Europe continues. Climate change, globalisation, international crime and the fight against poverty are issues of such magnitude that even the largest state on its own will not be able to meet them.

The EU Needs to Change

If the enlarged Union is to fulfil the expectations of its citizens it has to change.

The European Union needs to upgrade its institutional framework. The structures of the European Union were designed for six Member States. It is difficult to see how they could effectively function in a Union of twenty-eight or thirty Member States. This is one reason why the members agreed the new European Constitution. The Constitution is a good document, a document Ireland would like to see enacted as soon as possible.

Europe must make enlargement work and continue the enlargement process. The ten new Member States that joined on 1 May 2004 are adapting rapidly and effectively to the Union. The EU must reach an early agreement on the future financing of the Union to ensure that these new Member States receive EU support to reduce the income gaps between them and the old Member States.

Europe must work economically for all its citizens. The poor performance of the core economies in recent years has played a major part in dampening public ardour for the European project. The solution to these economic problems lies largely in the hands of national governments rather than at EU level.

The EU and Globalisation

Following the rejection of the European Constitution in France and The Netherlands, the European Council has launched a period of reflection during which each Member State is encouraged to have a national debate on Europe. I want our national debate to be open and inclusive.

In the national debates now taking place across the EU, we need to talk frankly about the European Union and globalisation. To the world outside the Union, the EU is a powerful and integrated economic bloc. Internally, however, the Union has not yet come fully to terms with globalisation. Among the twenty-five, we too often behave as if competition between the Member States is a challenge on a level with the competition we face externally from China, from India and from Brazil. We do not always understand that the success of any one Member State in attracting major mobile international investment is a success for all of us. We have also not fully harnessed the economic and social benefits of the internal market, of our common currency and of collective action in research and development.

There is a danger that the debate about how best the EU can face up to the competitive challenge of globalisation will be sidetracked into a fruitless discussion about the relative merits of different social models. There is, quite rightly, no uniform social model that is applicable to all of the Member States. All of the Member States are committed to social solidarity and to balancing the forces of the market with the protection of workers' rights. While there may be differences of emphasis, I believe that there is no deep division between the different social systems in the EU.

Instead of debating differing social systems, the EU needs an agreed approach to the challenge of globalisation. We need to focus on those areas where, acting together, we can ensure that the enlarged Union of 460 million people remains a global trade and economic power and a strong partner to the developing world. This means that we should concentrate on completing the internal market, including the market in services. It means that we should have a coherent strategy for managing our overall relationship with China and the other rising economies. It means that we should

have a strong dialogue with the social partners to deal with the economic and social dislocations that globalisation brings in its wake. It means EU investments in research and development, in retraining and the development of new skills, in active labour market policies.

It is only by dealing effectively with the concerns our citizens face in their daily lives that the Union can reconnect with the people and recover their trust and loyalty. Those EU Member States who have not had much experience in managing national referendums have been taken aback to find that many voters see the Union as remote from their daily concerns. They are increasingly exasperated by over regulation. They have questions about the accountability of the Institutions of the Union. In short they are disenchanted with the EU.

It against this background that the national debates during the period of reflection will take place. We can now expect to hear much from those who rejoice over the setbacks in the EU. We must soundly reject the voices of those who want us to return to the past. We in Ireland have heard their voices before. In 1972, they said that joining the EU would be the economic ruin of Ireland. In the five referendums we have had since 1972 they said that acceptance of the Single European Act and of the Treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice would see the end of Ireland's sovereignty and our absorption into a European super State where we would have no voice. They were wrong then. They are wrong now.

Ireland is now more successful, more confident and more optimistic than at any time since the foundation of the State. Our EU membership has played a vital role in this transformation. We must not take this for granted. We need to continue to work hard both to promote and protect our national interests in the EU, but also, and equally importantly, to work for the success of the Union as whole. A weak and divided Europe is not in Ireland's national interest. A Europe beset by doubt and losing faith in its vision is not in Ireland's interest.

A Changing Ireland in a Changing Union

Here in Ireland, I think our national debate should also devote some attention to Ireland's relationship with the EU. Over the past decade both Ireland and the Union have dramatically changed. For much of our membership per capita income in the majority of Member States was significantly in excess of ours. During that period Ireland has benefited greatly from Structural and Cohesion funds.

We are gradually approaching a time when we will pay into the EU budget more than we receive back. This progression should be seen as a mark of our success as an economy. During this period of reflection, I would like to promote greater public understanding of the reasons why our EU membership is, and will remain, of fundamental importance to our national prosperity even when we no longer benefit greatly from direct EU financial transfers.

The European Constitution, unlike the Treaties it replaces, sets out clearly what the citizens of Europe stand for and what their values are. It reflects the Union of values to which all member States subscribe namely: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

The Constitution also identifies the type of society that Europeans want - a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between men and women prevail.

It is on the basis of these shared values that the EU is a profound force for good both in the continent of Europe and in the wider world. The EU is the world's largest donor of development aid. It is at the forefront of efforts to prevent conflict and promote peace in regions of instability and conflict. It has an abiding commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights. It has learned much from the difficult history of the continent in the 20th century.

As our national debate focuses on the EU and globalisation, on the enlargement of the Union and on a changing Ireland in a changing Union, discussion will rightly and inevitably return again and again to the European Constitution. The years of work that resulted in the agreement on the European Constitution were not inspired by an out of touch elite determined to promote European integration at all costs. It was inspired by a recognition of the fact that the unification of Europe after the ending of the Cold War has forever changed both the continent and the Union.

The European Constitution provides the legal and institutional framework for the enlarged Union to act effectively in the interests of all its citizens. It resolves the debate about the relationship between the Union and the Member States for at least a generation. It will allow us to get on with the work of providing jobs, fighting crime,

protecting the environment, resolving conflict and helping the poor and underdeveloped.

Thank you.