

Ceann Comhairle speech at the opening of the COSAC plenary conference, Dublin Castle, 24 June 2013

Fellow parliamentarians, distinguished guests,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to Dublin Castle this morning from all corners of Europe for the forty-ninth COSAC plenary meeting. This is the final in a series of eight inter-parliamentary conferences under the parliamentary dimension to the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which is now in its last week.

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of Ireland's entry, in 1973, into what has become the European Union. I myself first took elected office the following year and, with 39 years in public life behind me, most of which I have served as a parliamentarian and Minister, I have had the privilege to watch Ireland's relationship with Europe develop and deepen.

This presidency is Ireland's seventh, and I am struck by the degree to which the parliamentary dimension of the Presidency has evolved over time and increased in importance. Indeed, the depth and the breadth of inter-parliamentary engagement and cooperation in the European Union today, more generally, is remarkable.

Inter-parliamentary activity in the EU, whether formal or informal, bilateral or multilateral, allows for the sharing of information and coordination of views between national and European parliamentarians. This forum, COSAC, plays a particularly important role in bringing together the members of the European affairs committees of national parliaments, together with the European Parliament. Such engagement is, I believe, critical to the effective functioning of parliaments in the European Union today. It ultimately helps to ensure that parliamentarians are better equipped to scrutinise EU proposals and hold their respective executives to account.

As the EU institutional framework has developed, the relationships between the Member States have become stronger. Nowhere, in my opinion, are the good relationships between our countries better epitomised than by the strong bonds that we feel as parliamentarians. Personally, I have always enjoyed and benefitted from meeting colleagues to discuss issues of common concern to our citizens, and ways and means of improving contact with them. I have had the privilege to meet colleagues from across the EU during my career and I believe that occasions like this offer us an opportunity to get to know each other on a more personal level, to understand each other's perspectives, and to further strengthen those bonds.

I know that we share a common concern as parliamentarians that public trust in politics and institutions has been eroded at both EU and national levels on foot of the economic crisis. The recent Eurobarometer survey carried out in the six largest Member States which suggested a widespread collapse in trust in the European Union is deeply worrying. Of course, in part this reflects the unpopularity of measures which were taken to address the crisis and the weaknesses in economic governance in Europe that were, in part, to blame for the crisis in the first place. We need to confront this crisis of confidence

crisis in the first place. We need to confront the crisis of confidence with a sense of urgency and with determination, and a clear understanding of what is at stake. The risk of a significant and irreversible disconnect between citizens and decision-making in the EU is a serious one, which threatens to undermine stability, future growth and prosperity and all that has been achieved in the European Union to date.

There is no denying that the last few years have been extremely difficult for aspects of European governance, dealing with a currency crisis, debt crisis, bank crisis and unemployment, particularly among our young citizens. Europe has come a long way in this short period of time, despite the trauma of the journey. The EU has been actively engaged in the adoption of proposals and measures designed to stabilise the situation and ensure that similar banking and sovereign debt crises are prevented in the future. Our economic architecture and the tools at our disposal are now markedly enhanced.

It is worth recalling that we were being told on a daily basis that the Euro would not survive, that there was a real possibility of a break-up of the Union. The sceptics had a field day. Well, here we are in 2013. We still have 27 Member States, 28 next week, and others anxious to join. The Euro is still around, has stabilised and the Euro area is looking forward to welcoming its 18th member. Banks are restructuring, debt is being brought under control, but still has a long way to go. I think a great deal of credit is due to European leaders for these achievements.

Concerns have been raised that the EU's overall response to the crisis has been driven by increased inter-governmentalism at the expense of the Community method and parliamentarism. These arguments resonate with us as parliamentarians and I am greatly encouraged by the debate that is now taking place at EU level and in the Member States on the need for greater democratic accountability and legitimacy in our Union. I commend the European institutions for placing this issue high on the agenda at this time.

Of course the immediate context of this discussion is the new framework of economic governance that has been developed in response to the crisis and to protect our common currency. Measures such as the European Semester, the "Two Pack" Regulations on budgetary surveillance, and on banking supervision, do raise questions regarding the accountability of the new system. This will be even more pronounced as further steps are taken towards closer economic and monetary integration, with the greater sharing of sovereignty which this implies.

There is a broad consensus across Europe on the need to bolster democratic legitimacy and accountability in the EU. As the debate on the future shape of the European Union gains momentum, it is critical that this focus on democratic legitimacy and accountability is maintained, and that we see firm action.

Parliaments, being close to citizens, clearly have a particularly important role to play in establishing links between citizens and European decision-making. I support the idea that parliaments should have the fullest role possible in policy formation, decision making and oversight processes. Distinct roles for national parliaments and the European Parliament are necessary. We need to ensure that existing

tools at the disposal of parliaments are fully utilised, and to consider where improvements might be necessary.

At the EU Speakers Conference in Cyprus in April, speakers agreed that the future of national parliaments depends largely upon how proactively they will use the new opportunities available, so that EU national Parliaments and the European Parliament contribute towards making the EU system of economic governance more legitimate and democratically accountable. I look forward to the moment when national parliaments make full use of these opportunities. The agreement on the establishment of a conference in line with Article 13 of the Stability Treaty is particularly welcome.

Communication is critical for the democratic process. I believe that one of the big issues to be dealt with is a communication deficit that exists between the European project and the European citizens. Too often, the only time people hear about the EU is in a negative sense, when new rules and regulations are being introduced, sometimes with the threat of fines or sanctions hanging over the Member State. We need to be more open and communicate more openly with citizens about the benefits of the EU.

There is a great deal that can be done in National Parliaments to bring greater focus on European issues on the floors of our respective Houses. I appreciate the improvement that has occurred through the establishment of European Affairs Committees, but I believe that their work must be brought to the floors of Parliaments during plenary sessions, and from there to the citizens through the media outlets, including, where possible, Parliamentary TV Channels, as well as through the use of internet and social media.

Nevertheless, despite the rise prevalence of social media, TV is still the primary source where people get their information and it is important we rise to the challenge of engaging with people through this medium.

Here in Ireland, our aim is to add value and engage with our citizens through the development of a parliamentary television channel, a user-friendly webcasting and on-line syndication

A parliamentary TV channel provides the public with the choice to watch the proceedings of their parliament when and where they choose. Rather than achieving prime-time viewership levels, the goal of the project is to allow the public choose when it views events in their parliament.

We would hope that in the fullness of time that we will also broadcast the proceedings of the European parliament, again helping to bring the institutions of the European Union closer to our citizens.

If the saying that "All politics are local," is true, then we should try to ensure that European issues become local too.

As you are all aware, Ireland is a programme country, and there is a huge focus on our economic situation internally. We're making a tremendous effort to exit the bailout programme later this year. But we can only achieve this with the understanding and support of our national parliamentarians and our citizens.

Fellow parliamentarians, distinguished guests,

I wish you well in your deliberations today and tomorrow and I look forward to hosting you for dinner this evening in Dublin's Mansion House.

(1,500 words)