



ÁRAS AN UACHTARÁIN

Remarks by President Michael D. Higgins at the Conference of the Committees of the National Parliaments of the European Union Member States dealing with European Affairs (COSAC)

Monday, 24th June 2013

Tá gliondar croí orm bheith anseo tráthnóna, ar ócáid an naoiú cruinniú is daichead de COSAC, agus fearaim fíor-chaoín fáilte romhaibh go léir go hÉirinn. Tar éis dom Parlaimint na hEorpa a aitheasc mí Aibreáin seo caite, tá mé thar a bheith sásta an deis a bheith agam anois dul i dtreis libhse, arb ionadaithe bhur bparlaimintí náisiúnta sibh, anseo in Éirinn. Dúinne anseo in Éirinn, tá tábhacht faoi leith ag baint le láthair an dinnéir seo tráthnóna, mar 'b'é san fhoirgneamh seo a tionóladh an chéad chruinniú dár Pharlaimint Náisiúnta – Dáil Éireann – i Mí Eanáir naoi déag naoi déag (1919).

[I am delighted to be here this evening on the occasion of the forty-ninth meeting of COSAC and I welcome you all to Ireland. Having addressed the European Parliament in April, I am particularly pleased to now have the opportunity to engage with you, representatives of your national parliaments here in Ireland. The venue for this evening's dinner is particularly important to us in Ireland as it is here that the first meeting of our National Parliament - Dáil Éireann - was held in January 1919.]

Like the European Union itself, this conference – which brings together the representatives of European Affairs Committees of the national parliaments of all Member States, together with the European Parliament and candidate countries – has grown, and its remit and contribution has strengthened over the years. At its first meeting in Paris in 1989 it comprised just ten member states; today twenty seven countries are proud to claim themselves as members of the European Union and we will, very shortly, be welcoming Croatia as our twenty eighth member.

It was of course during Ireland's 2004 Presidency that Croatia achieved EU candidate status so it is particularly appropriate that now, during our current Presidency, they complete their accession journey. I know their road to accession has been a long and at times very demanding one, but it is a road they have followed with unwavering determination and hope.

I would like, therefore, to wish the people of Croatia every success as they prepare to take their place and offer their voice on the European stage. I know their contribution will be appreciated as a refreshing reminder of the original impetus of the founders of the European Union, their vision and their values.

Now in its twenty-fifth year, COSAC has borne witness to many important milestones in the development of the European Union, providing a valuable forum for parliamentarians to meet, to exchange ideas and to make contributions to the institutions of the European Union.

The overarching theme of COSAC's discussions – how to enhance the role of national parliaments in the EU – has remained constant over the years and today forms an integral part of current debate on the future direction of the Union. The contribution of national parliaments to the effective functioning of the Union – and indeed the importance of the role of COSAC in this regard – is explicitly recognized in the Treaties.

There will always be in the role of the Committee, the choice, a difficult one, as to where the Committee is in the process, to initiate, to change or perhaps most important of all, review the architecture of the E.U. accountability mechanisms.

This month, at your meeting in Dublin, you are exchanging views on the topic of 'A forward and outward looking Europe'. We are living through exceptionally testing times for many Europeans: many economies across the Union remain in recession; 115 million Europeans are in or at risk of poverty (Bonesmo Fredriksen, K. (2012) 'Income Inequality in the European Union', OECE Working Papers, No 952 OECD Publishing) .

There has been severe disappointment among citizens in many States in our institutions and their policy responses, particularly our banking institutions in which so many had placed their trust, and 26 million people across Europe are without work. There is nothing more corrosive to society and more crushing to our citizens than endemic unemployment, particularly among the young.

While the characteristics of that unemployment are different across the different member states, and consequently the policy response must be suitably flexible and pluralist, the urgent task facing us now is to deliver sustainable and fulfilling employment and a return to real growth.

However, we need so much more than that. It is so important that we now debate how Europe is to become a truly outward looking community; one which promotes not only growth and jobs but also the formation of inclusive societies based on a social economy focused on responsible, fair, and sustainable development.

Ireland's Presidency is working to achieve, through its contribution, policies that will work to deliver stability and a return to economic growth and the necessary conditions to create jobs, promote inclusion and dignity for Europe's citizens.

Very importantly, agreement has been secured on the Youth Guarantee and €6 billion in funding has been allocated by the European Council to a Youth Employment Initiative. Ireland is also focusing on measures to address the education and skills requirements of young Europeans through the Erasmus for All and Professional Qualifications proposals.

The Presidency has also been working to advance agreement on the Multi-annual Financial Framework which would contribute greatly to Europe's economic recovery, unlocking critical supports in areas such as Cohesion and Regional Funding, Common Agricultural and Fisheries Policies and Horizon 2020.

Many long hours have already been invested to make progress on these priorities – and intensive efforts will continue right up to the final day of the Presidency.

Committees, like yours, drawn from Parliamentary Representatives, are the conduit between the citizens of Europe and the architecture of decision-making in the E.U. Many citizens seek more transparency on how that architecture has been assembled, has been changed, is proposed to change and how it works. By now they know of the Parliament, Council and Commission, but to what extent do they feel that they are participating in discussions that are ongoing between those institutions and for example, how decisions of the European Central Bank, or the European Investment Bank, are taken and the response of such bodies to the problem of unemployment in Europe. All of these issues reveal a deficit in public understanding of the relationships and interaction between the various institutions.

There can be no doubt that the European Union is currently facing some profound challenges and that the crisis it now faces is not just an economic crisis. Today, citizens in Europe are threatened with an unconscious drift to disharmony, a loss of social cohesion, a recurrence of racism in many cities and a deficit of democratic accountability. We also know that public confidence in the EU has fallen to historically low levels. In fact, less

than half of European citizens now claim to have a positive view of the EU; a trend that, if unchecked, could lead to a crisis of legitimacy and accountability and the erosion of solidarity between Member States. This is something to which there has to be a public and an institutional response. Rectifying this situation is a challenge for us all.

The important role of the elected representative and their assemblies cannot be overstated in these challenging times. It is to their Parliaments and elected representatives that citizens look for accountability, for strategic alternatives. If national parliaments were to lose the capacity to deliver accountability where else might it be found? In this year of the European Citizen, I want to wish you well as Parliamentarians in all your deliberations together and particularly in your dialogue with your electorate – the citizens of Europe. We, who enjoy a mandate from the people, must be authentic in dialogue with our citizens whose anxieties are matters which must take priority in our policy prescriptions.

The crisis we currently face is one caused in part by the failure of a particular system of ideas; by the failure of models of economy and society and their connection that were often invested with claims of certainty; and by the failure of policy makers and other leaders to adequately challenge prevailing assumptions and models which were regarded as unquestionable.

I have spoken before of the importance of Europe reflecting upon its past in a way that is ethical. It is equally important that we incorporate those qualities of the importance of ethics into consideration and debate on Europe's future.

At a time of economic crisis and loss of confidence in institutions and decision-makers; a time when citizens are instinctively searching for authenticity whilst feeling a sense of frustration at what is not being realised in real economic terms, we need to face the contradictions of our time with moral courage including a commitment to a discourse which recognises Europe's past with an adequate reflection and to recall the hopes and beliefs which were so embedded in the earliest visions of our European project.

We are now at a time when we must transcend the seeking of short term responses or technocratic logistical and systemised solutions to the complex problems we now face. It is a time for creative thought and the seeking of such solutions as will recognise the human impulse that is there when we long for a better world. Now, more than ever, we need open emancipatory scholarship that will give us a discourse that can accommodate a generous, humane version of Europe at home in the global community; one which addresses critical ethical questions of identity, human dignity and shared purpose.

I have spoken recently of the need for an approach to the study of the economy and economic policy which engages not only the disciplines of economics, law and politics but embraces the world views of other social sciences and ethical theory drawing on the pluralist and ethical tradition both before and after the European enlightenment.

We need new and courageous scholarship; educational institutions that are committed to the sustenance and development of independent thought and democracy; an economic literacy that can carry the demands of ethics and the insights of philosophy – a political economy for new times and new circumstances.

Out of our current crisis we have the opportunity to strengthen our European community and to do so we must ask ourselves what it really means to be a member of the European community. How do we interpret European integration? What place does human dignity hold in our understanding of European Citizenship?

In order to answer these questions, we must re-establish the importance of the pluralism of ideas in public discourse and public policy. In doing so it is also important to look to others outside our own traditions, as questions of sustainable growth, integration, citizenship, equality and dignity, are of course, questions of universal significance.

I truly believe that it is now time to recall the values that were central to the establishment of our Union and ensure these citizenship focused standards predominate in policy making. Those values are set out clearly in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. They are strong and compelling values which include human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

These values are essential to the achievement of an inclusive society, whether that society is confined by national borders or comprises the half a billion people that form the society that is the European Union. These values provide the core and the foundation of the Union itself. Irrespective of whatever economic, political or environmental challenges arrive, they must remain at the heart of that Union for it to remain true to the vision and aspirations of its founding fathers.

We must also reaffirm the value of the public space and public identity of our citizens. In this the European year of the Citizen, there has never been a greater or more urgent need to ensure the voice and view of our citizens can flourish: their hopes, their vulnerabilities, their crushing fears and their solutions. For too long the public space has been under attack and individuals have been treated as merely self-interested consumers.

In recent days there has been considerable debate across Europe about the 'cultural exception'. I fully understand the importance attached to this debate and agree with those who recognise the need for great reflection and sensitivity on the place of culture and the arts in our shared world.

It is so important, as I have argued as Minister for Culture from 1993 – 1997, and also as President of the European Council of Culture Ministers, that we protect and nurture our European heritage in all its richness and cultural diversity. The cultural space with all its humanity and with all its inherited wisdom is so much wider than the economic space. The commodification of our culture or the arts runs the risk of part of our European soul being lost.

It is when we locate economy within the space of culture that we can build an understanding of the many facets of sustainability; promote a new sense of solidarity; positively inspire a new model of economy that values fairness and is ethically robust; and be the bedrock from which, being self-confident about the integrity of our own culture, we can reach out to understand and respect other cultures.

Creativity which must always be socially defined is a powerful resource that has to be nurtured in our communities and by so doing it lays the foundation for social, cultural and economic transformation that is so urgently required. From the seeds of a diverse culture can come sustainable skilled employment.

Nowadays, in the most advanced countries, the creative industries are emerging as a strategic choice for reinvigorating economic growth, employment and social cohesion. The turnover of the European creative industries amounted to €654 billion in 2003, growing 12.3 percent faster than the overall economy of the European Union and employing over 5.6 million people.

Finally, a forward discourse for Europe has to be globally aware and globally responsible. In a world of global citizenry Europe must offer a lead in the advancement of global justice and in combating the pernicious

inequalities and poverty that afflict so many in developing countries. During its Presidency, Ireland has rightly placed the issues of poverty, hunger and climate change at the centre of its work. It is my conviction that global hunger in the 21st century represents the greatest ethical challenge facing the global community.

It is well established that the world produces enough food to feed its entire population, but more than one billion people are undernourished and almost six million children die every year from malnutrition or related diseases. The source of this hunger is poverty, created and sustained by gross inequalities across the world.

Climate Change presents another complex layer of challenges to our efforts against global poverty. Climate Change is not an abstract phenomenon: its consequences are present everywhere and perhaps most harshly and adversely in environments where people are least equipped to meet its force and ill effects – and least responsible for its causes. According to Christian Aid 182 million people in sub-Saharan Africa will die of diseases attributable to global warming by the end of this century.

The Millennium Development Goals represent our shared global commitment to poverty eradication and sustainable development. They are also an important manifestation of our global solidarity. However, while progress has been recorded against most goals, the United Nations reported in 2012 that it had difficulty in identifying areas of significant new progress and for the first time there are signs of what that United Nations calls ‘backsliding’. With less than two years to 2015, the UN reports that there is ‘no apparent commitment by Governments to ‘reverse the reversal’ in time. Fewer Millennium Development Goals will be reached in fewer countries as a result.

We cannot allow an economic crisis caused by speculation and unregulated markets which operated in an ethical vacuum to stall the progress of humanity, ensuring that one billion global citizens remain consigned to lives of relentless hardship and hunger. Europe must take its rightful place in leading the global collaboration on poverty eradication and in the fight against hunger. To abandon this responsibility would be the greatest betrayal of the promise of Europe.

Mar fhocal scoir,

Tá súil agam go mbíonn dea-chríoch leis an gcomhdháil seo ina bpléifidh sibh, agus ina ndéanfaidh sibh bhur macnamh ar an gcaoi a bhféadfadh sibh an Eoraip réamhbhreathnaitheach leathan-dearcach a theastaíonn chomh práinneach sin, a thabhairt ar an saol i dteannta le saoránaigh na hEorpa.

[In conclusion,

I would like to wish you a successful outcome to this conference in which you will discuss and reflect on how you, together with Europe’s citizenry can create the forward and outward looking Europe which is so urgently required.]

I would like to thank you for the valuable contribution you have made, and continue to make, to the continued evolution of the European Union.