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Speech by An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar T.D., to the European Parliament, Strasbourg, Wednesday 17 January 2018

President Tajani, Vice Presidents, Commissioner Hogan

Distinguished leaders of the political groups, Members of the European Parliament.

Dear friends,

It is a very great privilege to be the first speaker in your series of debates with Heads of Government on the future of the European Union.

Mr President, the European Union is at a decisive point in its history.

Despite all the upheavals of recent years – the rise of populism and euroscepticism, nationalism and anti-democratic forces - we meet in solidarity, with a renewed sense of purpose.

The European ideal has always been inspired by a spirit of optimism and a belief in a better future. While that ideal has been tested, it has not been broken. And based on the achievements of the past, we have a renewed appetite to face the challenges of the future.

In 1947 representatives from sixteen countries met in Paris to discuss how – in the words of Jean Monnet – they could resist economic decline and preserve political freedom.

En 1947, des représentants de seize pays se sont réunis à Paris pour discuter de la manière dont, selon les termes de Jean Monnet, ils pourraient résister au déclin économique et préserver la liberté politique.

L'Irlande était l'un de ces seize pays. La sagesse de la prédiction de Monnet selon laquelle «il n'y a pas d'avenir pour les peuples d'Europe autre que dans l'union» s'est vite fait jour.

Dès le début, les petits pays ont contribué de manière non négligeable au développement de l'Europe.

Dans les années cinquante, Joseph Bech, luxembourgeois et grand architecte de l'intégration, a joué un rôle capital dans la création de la Communauté européenne du charbon et de l'acier, et dans la tenue de la conférence de Messine en Sicile. Interrogé sur la présence de politiciens européens réunis en Sicile en 1955, un haut dirigeant politique britannique rétorqua que ces derniers avaient pris part aux fouilles archéologiques! Des fouilles qui ont servi de base au traité de Rome !

Dies waren Ausgrabungen, die die Grundlage für die Römischen Verträge legten!

Wir sehen die Stärke der europäischen Wertvorstellungen im Erbe der Persönlichkeiten wie Konrad Adenauer und Hans-Dietrich Genscher, deren Vision für Versöhnung und Integration in ganz Europa so wichtig war.

Wir sehen sie in der Arbeit Helmut Kohls und in seinem Glauben, die Bedürfnisse und Gleichberechtigung kleinerer Nationen zu beachten.

Wir sehen sie in der Vision Jacques Delors' und seinen Glauben an einen tieferen Sinn Europas, eine Seele für Europa, ohne den das ganze Projekt scheitern würde. Seine Arbeit bei der Schaffung einer gemeinsamen Währung, den Euro, ist ein bedeutsames Erbe. Seine Aufgabe an uns, einen größeren Sinn anzustreben, ist noch bedeutsamer.

Mr President, dear friends, the promise of a better future has motivated people to work for the European ideal since the beginning.

Speaking in this chamber today, I am reminded of one of the greatest figures in Irish politics, John Hume, who served as a member of this Parliament for 25 years.

John has spoken many times about the symbolism of the bridge from Strasbourg to Kehl, just across the border in Germany. How easy and ordinary it was to walk across that bridge, and, given Europe's history, how remarkable and profound that ordinariness was.

In the European Union, John Hume saw a model and a vision for how a lasting peace, however improbable, could be fostered and built. And he saw how that model of people working together, with shared purpose and endeavour –spilling their sweat instead of their blood, as he put it - could provide inspiration in our own country.



Today, a peace bridge crossing the River Foyle brings together the divided communities in John's native city of Derry, in Northern Ireland, a bridge that the European Union helped to build.

Dear friends, it is hard to imagine the Good Friday Agreement being made without our shared membership of the European Union and the single market.

In Ireland we are now having to contemplate our future without the foundation that underpinned it.

That is why the Irish Government has been so determined to protect the Good Friday Agreement, in all its parts, and in all that flows from it.

It is why we have insisted that there can be no return to a hard border on our island, no new barriers to the movement of people or to trade.

And it is why we are so deeply grateful for the remarkable solidarity and support we have received from Member States.

It is everything we hoped for and more. And it is proof positive of why small countries benefit so much from membership of the EU.

The Irish people are profoundly grateful for the unswerving support of this Parliament. In particular, I want to thank your President, Antonio Tajani; your Brexit coordinator, Guy Verhofstadt; the leader of the EPP, Manfred Weber, the head of my own political family in Europe; and all the other political groups who have been so supportive.

The solidarity of the Parliament has been matched by the Commission and the Council.

Special thanks are due to President Juncker; to the Commission lead negotiator, Michel Barnier; and to European Council President, Donald Tusk.

The EU has consistently recognised the unique position of Northern Ireland, and the unique situation in which it has been put by the decision of the UK to leave the EU.

The majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU; the majority of its representatives elected to the Northern Ireland assembly want to remain in the Customs Union and the Single Market; and it is likely that the majority of people living in Northern Ireland will remain European citizens after Brexit, because of their unique status as dual Irish/British citizens under the Good Friday Agreement.

The breakthrough achieved before Christmas means that the United Kingdom has guaranteed that, whatever its future relationship with the European Union, a hard border on the island of Ireland will be avoided. The Common Travel Area and its associated rights will be maintained.

As the negotiations move forward, we will continue to rely on your support and solidarity as we work to ensure that what has been promised in theory is delivered in practice. There can be no backsliding.

So, it is important that these commitments in the legal text of the Withdrawal Agreement, and firmly embedded in the UK's future relationship with the EU, whatever shape that ultimately takes.

For my part, I hope that it will be as close and deep as possible and consistent with the need for the Union to protect our internal market and the Customs Union.

Mr President, I was born European, and am part of a new generation of political leaders born after our countries joined the Union. We treasure what has been achieved and share the vision of the founders for further integration and co-operation. While I have always lived with the benefits of European membership, I have never taken them for granted.

I value what has been hard-won, and what past generations have sacrificed for us. The vision that delivered peace in Europe, opened the door to peace in my country.

The values of solidarity, partnership, cooperation, which are central to the European project, have brought Ireland from a position of being one of the least developed Member States when we joined, to one of the most prosperous today.

For us, Europe enabled our transformation from being a country on the periphery, to an island at the centre of the world, at the heart of the common European home that we helped to build.

The promise of Europe unlocked the potential of Ireland. It allowed us to take our place among the nations of the World

So, along with other member states who have benefitted so much from the EU, we have a particular responsibility now to lead on the future of Europe debate. We have much to offer and much to give - and I believe firmly in that responsibility and relish the opportunity.

So we should approach the debate on the future of Europe with a positive attitude - talking about what we want to achieve more than what we want to block or resist.

Many of the policy challenges we face are increasingly global. They cannot be met by nation states acting alone.

Issues such as mass migration, climate change, cyber-security, trade, and the regulation of medicines and major corporations, cannot be solved by twenty-eight countries coming up with twenty-eight different solutions.

In unity there is security, in cooperation there is strength. As we say in the Irish language – 'Ní neart go cur le chéile!'

So we should welcome those who aspire to - and who are ready to take on - the responsibilities and obligations of

membership.

The prospect of membership of the Union can be a powerful motivator for those seeking to build peace, freedom, prosperity and democracy in the Western Balkans. These countries should be given a pathway to membership.

Mr. President, I believe that in the Europe of the future all member states will be small states even if they do not all realise that yet. You only need to look at the list of the top sixty cities in the world in terms of population. Only one is in the EU, and it is currently getting ready to leave. In terms of population there is only one country in Europe in the top twenty in the world, and its population is falling.

I know that population does not equate to economic or military strength but there can be no doubt that these are also shifting east and south globally.

So, we're going to need to stick together if we are to protect what we have and export our values and world view.

A Europe worth building is a Europe worth defending. With the launch of PESCO in December, which Ireland was pleased to join, we are coming together to deal with new threats in an inclusive way.

The threats we face in the 21st century include cyber terrorism, cyber attacks, international terrorism, uncontrolled mass migration, natural disasters, and drug and human trafficking. We want to be involved in European actions against all of these.

Ireland also has a proud history of military neutrality, participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations, EU Common Security Defence Policy Operations and non-membership of NATO. So, we will participate in PESCO in ways consistent with those traditions.

Mr. President,

The Europe of the future, I believe, must:

1st. Continue to do well what it currently does well.

2nd. Focus on the big new challenges facing Europe and its citizens.

3rd. Where appropriate, devolve some powers back to member states, municipalities and regions.

4th. Engage citizens more and engage in more direct democracy.

In recent years Ireland has moved from being a net beneficiary of the EU Budget to a net contributor. Nonetheless, we are open to contributing more, but only if it is spent on things that contribute to the advancement of the European ideal.

For example, structural funds for Central and Eastern Europe to enable them to unlock their economic potential.

The EU should continue to fund well programmes and policies that work like the Common Agricultural Policy, and provide funding for research, innovation, Erasmus, Interreg, the EIB among others.

Budgets for these should be protected.

Europe can do new things. And for new programmes, we should use new money.

Ireland is a founder member of the euro, and a founder member of the Single Market. We were among the first to open our labour market to Europeans from Central and Eastern Europe.

We now call for the completion of the Single Market and the digital Single Market and above all a Single Market serves the interests of all our citizens and not just corporations.

I commend the parliament on its work making lives better for citizens by removing roaming charges within the EU. It helps bring people together. Likewise, I commend the way you have championed air passenger rights and your plans for Interrail.

Now is the time to fulfil the promise of the single market in other areas. For example, insurance, mortgages and loans, so that people can get cheaper loans from European lenders and insurers if needs be. I ask the Parliament to work on this in the period ahead.

I also believe that we should work more closely on the cost of medicines. This could save billions for taxpayers, freeing up funding to ensure that modern medicines are available to patients at the same time in every country. Let's pool the buying power of 450m people to do so.

I believe in more free trade agreements with third countries, and in completing monetary union.

I believe in a banking union to protect citizens' savings on a pan-European basis and reduce the exposure of individual member states.

And I think that a capital markets union would provide the building blocks for an integrated capital market across Europe.

In terms of improving democracy within the EU, I support a Europe-wide list for the European Parliament. Let's get people in cafes in Naples and restaurants in Galway talking about the same election choices.

Let's make permanent the Spitzenkandidat system, and democratise choosing candidates for other leading positions within the EU.

Let's establish a common asylum policy and system, to replace the current system which just isn't working. Too few countries have shouldered the responsibility of providing refugees with a fresh start in Europe. We can all do more and we must.

Let's put fire back into the engine of our social Europe by following through on the proclamation we issued in Gothenburg last year on jobs, employment rights, pensions and other things.

Whatever the future holds, Europe needs to be competitive economically. One of the ways to ensure this is by having competition among member states. This is particularly important for peripheral and less developed countries whose domestic markets are small and need inward investment.

My strong view is that national taxes that fund national budgets should be determined by national parliaments and governments.

Equally strong is my view that corporations should pay their fair share of tax. We cannot tolerate a situation where large companies can avoid paying any taxes anywhere.

That's as true for American tech companies as it is for European car manufacturers, or for international aerospace and defence companies.

Ireland has already taken steps to close loopholes in our tax laws. And we will do more. We strongly believe this should be done on an international basis through the OECD. Europe should not give advantages to our competitors by acting unilaterally.

Mr President, as a community, we must continue to look outwards - offering leadership and partnership, especially when it comes to Africa.

I believe Europe can show much greater leadership on Africa. I support the idea of an EU 'Marshall Plan' for Africa.

We have already witnessed the terrible impact that chaos in Syria and Libya has had on people in those countries and on Europe. They are both small countries. Imagine what would happen if similar events were to unfold in Egypt or Nigeria. The consequences are too awful to contemplate for them and for us.

By contrast, look east to Asia, the successful development of those countries has transformed them from countries to which we gave aid, to countries with which we trade. In the 21st century, Africa must succeed. It's in our interest and in theirs. So let's make it part of our mission.

I also support the Subsidiarity and Proportionality Taskforce. It is interesting that, on many matters, US states and Canadian provinces, even counties and municipalities, have greater autonomy and greater variation among them than EU member states currently have. Do we have the balance right? And does everything have to be harmonised and standardised?

Mr President, in making these decisions, it is vital that our citizens are engaged.

In Ireland we have launched a national debate, a citizens' dialogue on Europe. Our starting point is to focus on the hopes and dreams of our citizens.

Led by our Minister for Europe, we are undertaking a series of regional meetings and other initiatives across the country between now and Europe Day on 9 May.

I strongly encourage other countries to do the same.

Mr. President, it has been a great honour to be the first EU Head of State or Government to address the European Parliament on the hugely important subject of the Future of Europe. All of you - across all political groupings - have enormous political experience, insight and knowledge. There is a mass of wisdom, and also imagination in this Parliament and it is the perfect place to debate our future as we move forward.

I know that, under the guidance of President Tajani, you have already started to discuss the issues in a thoughtful and productive manner. Even before the Commission's White Paper, you adopted three Resolutions on our future. I hope that this first debate in the series - and the others to follow - will be lively and spontaneous, and I look forward to engaging with you during the course of the session.

The EU has always offered the promise of a better future. It is not a future that will be handed to us. We must work to create it.

We can achieve a more perfect union. We can speak to Europe's soul.

Conclusion

European values - peace, friendship, freedom, justice, opportunity, cooperation - are the values that we are committed to advancing in Ireland, on the island of Ireland, within our European family, and in our relations with the wider world.

Europe has been a great success. And we owe its achievements - peace, individual rights, equality before the law, prosperity - to that political creativity and the friendship we have built together.

Europe is the outcome of one of the greatest acts of political creativity in all of human history.

The same creativity and vision should drive our work today.

The European ideal took flight in the second part of the twentieth century when people imagined a world that was joined

together by mutual interest, trust and affection, replacing one that was torn apart by jealousy, fear and animosity.

Building on the great successes and achievements of the past, I believe that with imagination, with creativity, and with courage, we can provide a soul and a heart for Europe, creating opportunities for all our citizens. We can ensure that the European ideal that took flight in the last century will soar in the twenty-first.

Mr President, I will conclude in the first official language of my country.

Creidim gurbh í an spríd dhearfach agus chreideamh i dtodhchaí níos fearr ba chúis le h'inspirid an idéal Eorpaigh i gconaí.

Murach an Eoraip, níor chuireadh ár dtír san áireamh i measc náisiúin na cruinne.

Táimid buíoch do bhaill Stáit Eorpaigh as a ndlúthpháirtíocht agus an aire a thug siad dúinn le linn chomhráithe Bhrexit.

Deimhníonn sin an fáth a fhaigheann tíortha beaga tairbhe as a mballríocht den AE.

Anois tá an deis againn Eoraip na Todhchaí a shamhlú.

Ba mhaith liom leanúint ar aghaidh leis an dul chun cinn atá á dhéanamh againn, agus díriú ar na dúshlán móra nua atá i gceist. Ba mhaith liom go mbeidh páirt níos gníomhaí ag saoránaigh i ndaonlathas díreach.

Agus tá súil agam go léiríonn an Eoraip níos mó treoir faoi cúrsaí na hAfraice. Tacaím leis an smaoineamh maidir le "Marshall Plan" don Afraic.

Agus muidne ag cur le rathúlacht na laethanta atá thart, creidim, le samhlaíocht agus le misneach go mbeimid ábalta anam agus croí a chur ar fáil don Eoraip, agus deiseanna a chruthú dár saoránaigh go léir.

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