

Speech by Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson at the signing of the EEA Agreement (Oporto, 2 May 1992)

Caption: On 2 May 1992, at the signing, in Oporto, of the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA), Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, Chairman of the EFTA Council and Icelandic Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, recognises the significance of the event.

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Speech by Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson (Oporto, 2 May 1992)

Let me first express my particular satisfaction that our meeting today to sign the EEA Agreement takes place in Oporto; Portugal was a founding member of EFTA, shared its destiny for a quarter of a century, and kept special ties with EFTA to this day. This special relationship now finds its place within a larger framework. We are delighted that we can set its cornerstone here today, in the company of an old friend and partner.

Looking back on the EEA negotiations, and at the long and arduous process leading up to the results, that we are now reaping, the difficulties and the crises wither away and only the achievement remains.

And it is a considerable achievement: at the beginning many thought that oil and water could more easily be joined, than the different conceptions underlying EC and EFTA: a satisfactory link or compromise could never be reached. And indeed a multitude of problems have arisen in the course of these negotiations. It is a tribute to our basic solidarity, and a measure of our common outlook and common values, that we have been able to overcome these problems, in one way or another, to quote one of the key phrases of these negotiations.

The search for a solution was sometimes compared to the squaring of the circle: this is in many ways an apt comparison: you can never express with perfect exactitude the area of a circle. But you can come as close to it as you need. We needed a compromise that assured autonomy on both sides, but also common rules and a homogeneous environment for economic operators. The EEA Agreement achieves this, in a pragmatic way.

The EEA is indeed an ambitious undertaking. It establishes the world's biggest market based on common rules. A single economic area where goods, persons, services and capital will be able to move freely.

It is an agreement that puts obligations on states and confers rights of citizens.

As of 1993 individuals will be able to trade, work, live and offer services throughout the nineteen countries constituting the EEA. It is far more than a pure commercial arrangement in the possibilities it opens up for workers, students, researchers and scholars, as well as businessmen and consumers.

Today is also a day of vindication of belief. Those who doubted the EFTA countries' capacity to negotiate coherently and speak with one voice have been proven wrong. So have those who believed that the complex institutional framework of the EC would make a pragmatic compromise of this type impossible to accomplish, our common achievement bodes well for Europe's future.

Looking ahead we have to remain aware that our vision of Europe has never been that of a closed shop. However desirable close co-operation in Europe may be such closeness must never result in erecting new borders towards other Europeans or the outside world in general. Europe needs openness, new types of partnerships, innovative forms of co-operation.

From today's ceremony we will return home to face ratification of the EEA Agreement by nineteen national parliaments, one referendum and the European Parliament. Voluminous though it may be, the basic lines of the EEA Agreement are clear. All of our parliaments have had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with it for several months already. I am confident that we will in less than one year, be able to celebrate together the joint entry into force of the internal market and the EEA Agreement, on schedule.

It only remains for me to thank my EC colleagues and the Commission, as I have already had the opportunity to address my EFTA colleagues. I see no reason to hide that the going has been tough, the Commission has a team of excellent negotiators, backed up by demanding member states. But in the end we can all agree that it has been worth it. We now have a new and solid basis to develop even further our co-operation. It is better to bring difficulties out in the open and solve them, rather than paper over them and hope that they will disappear. We look forward to continuing the close working relationship we have forged together. As we now enter the implementation stage of this, our common endeavour, what is left for us, the EFTA Ministers is to report back to our respective Parliaments and Peoples, with our final report. It would

consist of two words: Mission accomplished.