

Address given by Romano Prodi on the achievements of the Irish Presidency (Strasbourg, 21 July 2004)

Caption: On 21 July 2004, Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, outlines to the European Parliament the achievements of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union and emphasises the importance of the work of the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) having been completed and an agreement having finally been reached on the draft European Constitution.

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President, Taoiseach, Honourable Members,

It gives me great pleasure to see Parliament's new President now properly in harness today.

It is also a pleasure to see the newly elected Members from all our Member States gathered here in the Parliament of our enlarged Union.

The new Europe is taking shape before our eyes in this House. It is an immensely moving and exciting development.

This larger, more diverse Union of ours now needs to be able to take decisions and act. And that brings me to what the Taoiseach has just told us about the achievements of the Irish Presidency and in particular the results of the European Council.

I congratulate the Irish Presidency on their skilful diplomacy, their political discernment and their steadfast dedication to the European cause.

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First and foremost, the Irish Presidency has wound up the Intergovernmental Conference and forged an agreement on a Constitution for Europe.

As the saying goes, defeat is an orphan, but victory has a thousand fathers. And indeed many - particularly in this House - have worked hard to make the Constitution a reality.

But we all know that the last lap is the most difficult. The Irish Presidency has guided the IGC into safe waters, respecting the positions of all parties and paying careful attention to detail.

It has put forward innovative solutions whilst maintaining the overall balance. It has persuaded all sides that the draft is ambitious but also represents a realistic compromise. In other words, the draft Constitution before us is the best compromise possible.

And let us not underestimate the impact of the Taoiseach's personal involvement in overcoming opposition on the most sensitive issues.

As we look back over the last five years, we see amazing developments. When I first spoke before the House only five years ago, on 5 May 1999, the Treaty of Amsterdam had just come into force. At that time, nobody dreamed that a Constitution was possible. And yet, the need for a Constitution strikes us all as obvious today.

The reason is simple: the Constitution will allow the enlarged Union to work more effectively in the interest of its peoples.

The Constitution strengthens democracy, transparency and accountability in the Union. It lays down the Union's values and principles and provides a comprehensive legal basis for its policies.

In particular it incorporates the Charter of Fundamental Rights and states how qualified majority decisions are to be taken by the Council - by a double majority of States and peoples.

No one claims the Constitution is perfect. The Commission, for one, would have liked stronger Union powers in some areas, such as economic governance.

In this connection I welcome the recent ruling of the European Court of Justice. It provides legal clarity on some provisions of the Treaty and the Stability and Growth Pact.

Unanimity is still required for decisions on taxation, own resources and the Financial Perspective, and partially for social policy and the common foreign and security policy.

But the Constitution is clearly a major step forward along the road to European integration. In the next while, the process of ratification will focus attention.

Many countries have opted for referendums. But whether the decision is taken by referendum or by a vote in parliament, this time is crucial.

In the next few months we need to explain to people what the Union really is - and what it is not - and why we need a Union that works properly.

We need to foster a serious, in-depth debate about the Constitution and what it means for Europe.

We need to make sure the answer in any referendum or parliamentary vote is not a knee-jerk reaction to the situation in individual Member States, but a properly thought-out response to the real issue.

And that real issue, Honourable Members, is Europe. Because rejecting the Constitution would in practice mean a huge setback for the European integration process.

My worry is that national concerns might mask the real issues, and short-term partisan advantages may outweigh the long-term benefit of a Constitution for our Union.

This means the right arguments need to be put forward in the national debates.

I would like to take this opportunity to give my views on a criticism voiced lately - namely, that the Constitution would mean a step backwards for "Social Europe".

This is simply not true. Here are the facts: the Constitution largely preserves the status quo in terms of the Union's common policies, except as regards external policy and action in the area of freedom, security and justice.

In truth the Constitution creates a framework for the institutions to use for the benefit of all.

This is true of the internal market provisions, and it is true of the provisions on social policy.

But it is also true that it brings some improvements:

The Constitution makes full employment and social progress objectives of the Union;

It recognises gender equality and the rights of minorities as values common to the Member States;

It requires the Union to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among Member States;

The Union formally recognises and promotes the role of the social partners at Union level and facilitates dialogue between the social partners while respecting their autonomy;

The Constitution states that the Union's trade policy must not seriously disrupt the organisation of social, education and health services;

It recognises the value of services of general economic interest and their role in promoting social and

territorial cohesion.

Overall the Constitution is more ambitious, more coherent and more complete than the present Treaties.

In my opinion, these are essentially political - not technical - points. We must keep working politically to achieve further progress in this direction - in Commission proposals, in Parliament, with Member States and in the Council.

There is more and more concern for “Social Europe” and a more political Union will help to consolidate this.

So I call on all to do their utmost to ensure that people understand what is really at stake. Voting “yes” to the Constitution also means voting for the benefits of “Social Europe”.

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The Constitution is an historic achievement. But it was not the only item agreed at the European Council.

There was the recognition of Croatia as a candidate country. This confirmed the Union’s offer of prospects of membership for the countries of this region of Europe.

Now that the Council regards Croatia as meeting the Copenhagen criteria, negotiations are set to begin in early 2005.

The Macedonian Government too has already presented its membership application, and is pressing ahead resolutely and judiciously to make it succeed.

In Justice and Home Affairs, there have been advances - and hold-ups - in the Action Plan to fight terrorism. The Tampere programme is moving forward and a new phase now needs to be launched.

The Council also called on the Member States to close the delivery gap in implementing the Lisbon Strategy.

We welcome the Council’s desire to step up strategic partnerships - in particular its support for our proposals for a European Neighbourhood Policy.

I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the Irish Presidency on the agreement unanimously supported by the whole Council - on the name of my successor.

Lastly, I congratulate them on deciding to appoint Javier Solana as the Union’s Foreign Minister once the Constitution comes into force.

I wish José Manuel Barroso and Javier Solana every success in the future.

Thank you.