

Address given by Bertie Ahern on the Irish Presidency (Strasbourg, 21 July 2004)

Caption: On 21 July 2004, Bertie Ahern, Irish Prime Minister and President-in-Office of the Council of the European Union, outlines to the European Parliament the outcome of the Brussels European Council held on 17 and 18 June 2004 and welcomes the achievements of the Irish Presidency.

Source: Ahern, Bertie, Declaration on the Irish Presidency. [ON-LINE]. [Strasbourg]: European Parliament, [16.06.2005]. Available on

http://www2.europarl.eu.int/omk/sipade2?SAME_LEVEL=1&LEVEL=4&NAV=X&DETAIL=&PUBREF=-//EP//TEXT+CRE+20040721+ITEM-001+DOC+XML+V0//EN.

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Ahern, Bertie, Council. A Uachtaráin Borrell, A Uachtaráin Prodi, a Chomhaltaí Onóracha de Pharlaimint na hEorpa, agus a dhaoine uaisle.

Tá an-áthas orm a bheith anseo inniu ag an gcéad Seisiún Iomlánach den suí nua de Pharlaimint na hEorpa. Ba mhaith liom an deis seo a ghlacadh le comhghairdeas a dhéanamh le gach comhalta nua ó na fiche cúig Ballstát den Aontas Eorpach ar a dtoghadh an mhí seo caite i bhfeidhmiú an ghnímh daonlathais osnáisiúnta is mó riamh sa domhan. Is maith an rud daoine a bhí anseo cheana a fheiceáil in aontas le daoine nua a bheith i láthair.

(President Borrell, President Prodi, honourable Members of the European Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, I am very pleased to be here today at this first Plenary session of the new European Parliament. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate all Members, from across the twenty-five Member States of the European Union, on their election last month in the greatest supranational exercise in democracy that the world has ever known. It is good to see familiar faces and new faces alike.)

Mr President, I see that some Members are having difficulty receiving their Irish language interpretation. Perhaps when Irish is fully recognised in Europe we will have one difficulty less.

I am very pleased to be here today at the first plenary session of the new European Parliament. I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate all Members, from across the 25 Member States of the European Union, on their election last month in the greatest supranational exercise in democracy that the world has ever known. It is good to see familiar faces and new faces alike in this new Parliament.

I would also like, President Borrell, to congratulate you on your election to the post of President of the European Parliament and to wish you well. In Ireland, and particularly as outgoing presidency, we are very conscious of the crucial and constructive role played by the Parliament in the work of the European Union. During our presidency we enjoyed an immensely cooperative and mutually supportive relationship with the European Parliament, which was an essential element in the realisation of many of our presidency goals. I wish you every success in the exercise of your office over the coming years.

I have come here today to report on the outcome of the June European Council and on the work of the Irish presidency of the Council for the first six months of 2004. Before I do, however, I want to outline the two key principles which underlined Ireland's presidency and indeed underpin Ireland's general approach to European affairs.

The first and most basic principle that informed our approach was that Europe must work - and must be seen to work - for its people. Too often, the debate on European issues can drift into a world of jargon and theory. In doing so it runs a real risk of losing the attention and, in due course, the support of its citizens.

The European Union is not a matter of theory. It has and will continue to make a real difference to the lives of its citizens. Without it, Europe could not have recovered from the devastation of the world wars. Without it, Europe could not have created a vibrant single market and a strong and stable single currency. Without it, we would not have had the frameworks of social and environmental protection which are the cornerstones of the European model. And, of course, without it we would not have been in a position to embrace and support the Europeans who have suffered half a century of totalitarian oppression.

We all need to focus on making the new enlarged European Union relevant and responsive to our citizens. To do so we need to focus on that which unites us rather than that which divides us. We need to focus on the key concerns of the citizen: jobs, social and environmental protection, peace and security. They have been the ingredients of Europe's success. They must remain at the centre of our attention as leaders, legislators and Europeans.

The second principle that has underpinned our approach to Europe has been the principle of fairness.

Whether you are large or small - as Ireland is - rules matter. The fair, even-handed and transparent application of those rules matters even more. The European Union has created a zone where the concerns of all can be respected, the identities of all can be strengthened and the fundamental interests and rights of all can be protected. It is essential that the traditions of equality, fairness and cooperation that have been the keystones of the European Union be reinforced in the new enlarged Union.

When I addressed this House in January, I set out five main areas of work for the Irish presidency. We wanted a speedy and successful outcome to the work of the Intergovernmental Conference. We wanted a successful enlargement and we wanted to progress the ongoing enlargement negotiations. We were determined that the Spring European Council would help to revitalise and reinvigorate the Lisbon Strategy. I reported comprehensively on this issue to Parliament in March 2004. In the Justice and Home Affairs area we wanted to deliver on the commitments made in the Amsterdam Treaty and in the Tampere programme. Last, but by no means least, we sought to give renewed coherence and impetus to the European Union's external agenda.

One of the main issues on our agenda, and one on which, I am delighted to say, we had a successful outcome, was the nomination of the new President of the European Commission. José Manuel Durão Barroso played a full part in the search for the next President of the Commission. It was only towards the end of the process that he allowed his name to go forward as a candidate for the position. I was therefore very pleased that the European Council by consensus agreed to propose Mr Durão Barroso as its nominee for President of the European Commission.

At such a crucial time in the Union's development we could not have found a better candidate. He is a man who is prepared to lead and is able to take decisions. He is a committed European and has a deep understanding of the interests of all Member States, large and small, old and new. I have no hesitation in recommending him to you.

I am also delighted that it was possible to reach agreement on other important appointments. Javier Solana, who has been outstanding in his present functions, will continue in the post of Secretary-General of the Council, and Pierre de Boissieu will continue as Deputy Secretary-General. On the entry into force of the European Constitution, following its ratification in every Member State, Secretary-General and High Representative Solana is set to become the Union's first Foreign Minister.

A particular highlight of our presidency was, of course, the agreement we reached on a new Constitution at the Intergovernmental Conference on 18 June. This was the culmination of more than two-and-a-half years' work that began with the Laeken Declaration in December 2001. The new Constitution is a tribute to the commitment and political will of all of the participants in the European Convention and the Intergovernmental Conference.

Today, nonetheless, I want to pay a special tribute to the work of the European Parliament. Throughout the process, in the European Convention and the IGC, Parliament has shown a deep sense of commitment to the European Union and to the citizens whose interests it directly represents. The Convention outcome in particular - the great bulk of which was unaltered in the Intergovernmental Conference - reflected much that was brought to the table by the representatives of this Parliament.

I am conscious, too, that in the course of the Intergovernmental Conference the same positive, flexible and constructive attitude was struck throughout. I want to acknowledge especially the hard work that was done to find solutions to issues of particular concern to Parliament, and which was essential to finding an overall agreement. A final deal would not have been possible without the assistance and commitment of Parliament. I want to express my warmest thanks to you all, in particular to Mr Brok and Mr Hänsch and, of course, the former President of the European Parliament, Mr Cox. They gave enormous help, assistance and commitment to me and Mr Roche, my Minister for Europe, who is with me today. We deeply appreciate all their help.

You will all be more than familiar at this stage with the contents of the Constitution. I would still

nonetheless like to highlight some of the features that make it such a positive step forward for the Union. We have succeeded in setting down clearly in one single document what the Union is and what the Union does. We have defined a set of values and objectives that we can all share and which make the European Union unique across the world.

We have enhanced the democratic legitimacy of the European Union by extending the powers of the European Parliament. We have also strengthened the role of national parliaments and opened the Council of Ministers to more public scrutiny. We have clarified the division of powers between the Union and the Member States. It is now clear how decisions are taken, and who is entitled to take them. The principles of subsidiarity and proportionality have also been strengthened.

We have incorporated the Charter of Fundamental Rights as an integral part of the Constitution. In a significant advance in the area of human rights, the Union's institutions and the Member States when implementing Union law will be bound by the Charter, and the Union's citizens will have the right to legal redress if they feel their rights have not been upheld. In addition, the Union is to accede to the European Convention on Human Rights, which will help to ensure consistency between the Courts in Strasbourg and Luxembourg.

We have agreed an institutional framework that fully respects the rights of all Member States in all of the Union's institutions. Each Member State will nominate a member of the Commission until 2014. At that time a move will be made to a smaller Commission with members from two-thirds of the Member States selected on the basis of absolutely equal rotation, unless the European Council decides unanimously to fix a different size. We have thus provided the basis for an effective Commission into the future which, I know you agree, is of crucial importance for the Union.

The principle of double majority voting, enshrining the dual nature of the Union as a Union of States and citizens, will be implemented in a way that respects the concerns of all IGC participants and enhances the efficiency of decision-making. The new team presidency arrangements bringing three Member States together to implement an agreed programme will help the Council to become more effective and efficient. The new permanent President of the European Council, Foreign Minister and External Action Service will enhance coordination and allow the Union to play a more effective role in the wider world.

These are all remarkable achievements, which many would have believed impossible at the outset of the Convention process. I thank all those in the Convention, all those who helped us, my good colleague the President of the Commission Mr Prodi, his colleagues who worked so hard to help us in our work, and, of course, Mr Giscard d'Estaing, who was the President of the Convention. Work is now getting under way to prepare the text for signature by Heads of State or Government on 29 October in Rome. Following signature, attention will focus on ratification, which is intended to be concluded at the latest by 1 November 2006.

Some Member States will hold referendums, others will ratify the text using parliamentary procedures. Irrespective of the choices made by Member States, it is incumbent on us all to explain what is in the Constitution, and why it will be so beneficial for the Union, the Member States and especially our citizens. The questions posed at the European Council in Laeken in December 2001 - how to make the Union more effective and efficient; how to prepare it to play a more effective role in the wider world, and how to bring the Union closer to its citizens - have been well answered. Our new Constitution will equip us to meet, with confidence, the challenges that the Union is facing as it continues to widen and deepen.

The Union has undergone a lengthy and exhaustive process of Treaty change in recent years. It is now time for us to have the confidence to see the new Constitution as the Union's bedrock in the same way that the Treaty of Rome has served us so well over the course of more than half a century. Our focus must now turn fully to formulating and implementing those policies our citizens expect of us.

As our Union enlarges, continuing to be able to take decisions that will serve the needs of our people will be critical. The new European Constitution will enable the Union to engage constructively with the future

challenges and opportunities that it will face.

During our six-month term as presidency, Ireland was honoured and privileged to welcome 10 new Member States into the European Union on 1 May. We marked the occasion by a formal and symbolic ceremony - a 'Day of Welcomes' - in Dublin. This was a truly historic moment for the European Union. It was a moment of great opportunity and hope for all the people of Europe.

Of course, the enlargement process did not end on 1 May. We are delighted to have achieved substantial progress in negotiations with Bulgaria and Romania. The European Council noted with great satisfaction that Bulgaria had provisionally closed negotiations in all outstanding chapters. In addition, Romania made significant progress, provisionally closing negotiations in three chapters of the acquis. As an example of a very concrete step towards accession, work has just commenced, under the Dutch presidency, on the drafting of the Accession Treaty. We encourage both countries to maintain and accelerate their efforts and look forward to their accession in January 2007, if they are ready.

The June European Council welcomed the significant progress which Turkey has continued to make in the reform process, and the sustained efforts of the Turkish Government to meet the Copenhagen political criteria. The Union has reaffirmed its commitment that, if the December European Council decision on the fulfilment of the political criteria is positive, accession negotiations with Turkey will be opened without delay. This decision will be taken on the basis of the Commission's report and recommendation. It will be taken in an objective and transparent manner.

Also in June the European Council decided that Croatia is a candidate for membership and that negotiations should begin early in 2005.

Our presidency had responsibility for managing the initial phase of negotiations on the future Financial Perspectives which will determine funding for the Union from 2007 to 2013. Our aim was to examine the Commission's ideas in detail and to offer feedback to the Commission in preparing its legislative proposals. This we did, and the June European Council found the report we prepared to be a useful contribution. In June we also agreed to reach political agreement on the dossier next year.

The focus of our presidency in the Justice and Home Affairs area was on the delivery of commitments under the Amsterdam Treaty and in the broader Tampere programme for the creation of an area of freedom, security and justice. The last six months saw very substantial progress. We adopted the asylum qualifications directive and achieved political agreement on the asylum procedures directive. The two cornerstones for a common asylum system are now in place.

We moved the agreement on establishing a European Border Management Agency forward. This is a significant measure in the effort to fight illegal immigration. We also reached political agreement on the admission of third country nationals for studies and related purposes which recognises the positive contribution that legal migration makes to the Union. We worked to facilitate better access to justice across borders for citizens of the Union, adopting, for example, the victims of crime directive to ensure compensation to victims of violent crime.

2004 marks the end of this five-year Tampere programme. In June the European Council agreed that the time had come to launch the next phase of the process and the Commission will now prepare proposals for consideration in December.

In the related area of terrorism, and in the aftermath of the appalling terrorist attacks in Madrid, the March European Council adopted the Declaration on Combating Terrorism. In June we noted the significant progress made in implementing the measures set out in the Declaration and the work of the European Union Counter-Terrorism Coordinator. The next steps are now mapped out in the revised plan of action, which was also adopted in June.

In the external relations area we sought to give renewed coherence and impetus to the European Union's

complex external agenda guided by the European security strategy adopted by the European Council last December. I believe that our efforts in this area were very successful.

We emphasised effective multilateralism, conflict prevention and the development of a European Security and Defence Policy. We worked to strengthen and develop key partnerships, including the transatlantic relationship, on the basis of our shared interests and values. We worked hard to ensure that the Millennium Development Goals, with their strong emphasis on poverty eradication and sustainable development and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, were given the high focus that they deserve.

Many of you in this Parliament follow closely a range of external relations issues which are of particular interest to you and your constituents. You know, therefore, the progress that has been made during the past six months and what remains to be done in many challenging areas. Across the range of issues - be it the transatlantic relationship, the European Union's engagement with Africa or the need to strengthen our relations with Russia and with Asia - we can report real and lasting progress.

We have circulated a report on Ireland's presidency of the European Union to each Member of Parliament which sets out the key developments in the external agenda for our six-month term, as well as developments in relation to the Union's internal agenda. I will be happy to respond to your queries in the debate that follows.

It has been a challenging and rewarding six months for us all. At the beginning of the presidency, when I addressed this House, I said that our overall objective was to secure outcomes that would have a positive impact on the lives of Europe's people.

I strongly believe that, with the successful enlargement of the Union, the agreement on the European Constitution, the good progress made over the last six months on the Lisbon Agenda and Justice and Home Affairs, as well as in our relationships with key partners, the Union has made a great step forward. We must all continue to work to communicate better with our citizens so that they can become better informed and engaged in relation to developments within the Union which affect their daily lives in so many positive ways.

I have no doubt that the Netherlands presidency will be as successful as we know it will be challenging. Like Parliament, I wish it well.

The theme of Ireland's presidency was 'Europeans working together'. During the last six months, I believe that the Council and the European Parliament have worked together in an exemplary way. The experience has left me firmly convinced that, working together cooperatively - as Member States and institutions - we can build a better Europe and contribute to a fairer, more secure and more peaceful world.

It is a great honour for me to report on the six months of the Irish presidency, but it is not just on the six months, because in any presidency there is a lead-in of about a year. Thus, for the last 18 months I have been dealing with the leaders of the groups in Parliament. I wish to thank them for the time they gave to me and their visit to Dublin in December 2003. They gave me very good advice. Throughout the presidency both Minister Cowen and Minister Roche in particular were here many times. Courtesy was shown to all my colleagues. We were determined to work closely with Parliament, to give it a lot of time, listen to its views and to reflect that through the institutions and our work.

The experience has been enormously rewarding. It is a challenge for a small country. We do not have 800 officials to bring to European Council meetings, nor three planes. We do not have an enormous bureaucracy. We have Ambassador Anderson and her people, who worked very hard in Brussels for us, and our people who worked here in Parliament. It adds up to a small team and thus we got to know so many of the people here personally. For that reason, I wish to say how delighted I am to be here today, to thank you for your cooperation and to wish the new Parliament well, in particular the newly elected Members. They start an exciting part of their own political careers. I wish to say to the returning Members that I hope we in Ireland can keep up the good relationships that we have established. In particular I wish all my Irish colleagues of

all political persuasions well for the six months ahead.

Lastly, as I said at the outset to you, President Borrell, you have a difficult job - a very demanding task - both within Parliament and internationally. I wish you every success with it.

(Loud applause)