

Address given by Bertie Ahern on the European Constitution (12 May 2005)

Caption: On 12 May 2005 in Dublin, Bertie Ahern, Irish Prime Minister, delivers an address in which he emphasises the importance of a Constitution for the European Union and stresses his country's commitment to the European cause.

Source: Speech on the European Constitution by the Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern T.D at the Presentation of the European Movement's European of the Year Award. [ON-LINE]. [Dublin]: Department of Foreign Affairs, [20.06.2005]. Available on http://foreignaffairs.gov.ie/Press_Releases/20050512/1757.htm.

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/address_given_by_bertie_ahern_on_the_european_constitution_12_may_2005-en-535fff70-abbf-467e-827d-58a29b132665.html

Publication date: 29/11/2013

Speech on the European Constitution by the Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern, T.D., at the Presentation of the European Movement's European of the Year Award (12 May 2005)

It is a great honour to be awarded the European of the Year Award. I would like to thank the European Movement and the board of Adjudicators for their decision. And, of course, I would like to thank all of the people who nominated me for the Award. As a politician, it is always a pleasure to receive a positive endorsement from the public.

Having presented this Award to others in the past, it is a special pleasure to receive it myself. It is also special to receive the Award for my work in the European Union. The 1972 referendum campaign for Ireland's accession to the EU was my first political campaign as an aspiring young politician. To this day, I retain a firm belief that Ireland's place is at the heart of the European Union.

When I campaigned for Europe in 1972, I could not have foreseen that, over thirty years later, I would have attended over 35 meetings of the European Council as Taoiseach.

My experience in Europe has reinforced my conviction that the European Union is both the anchor of peace and stability on this continent and an increasingly powerful global actor in support of the UN's efforts to prevent conflict, build peace and fight poverty.

The biggest success of Ireland's EU Presidency, which continues to have an impact throughout the European Union, is the agreement on the draft Treaty establishing the European Constitution. The ratification and subsequent implementation of that Constitution is now one of the key priorities for Europe.

Last year I spent a great deal of time, in my capacity as President of the European Council, talking to my EU colleagues about their concerns. These discussions, which covered not only the European Constitution, but also economic and social issues, confirmed my view that there is no difference between the European agenda and our own domestic agenda. They are one and the same.

A Europe that is seen to be delivering is a Europe which the people can identify with and support.

Europe is about jobs, growth, social solidarity, environmental protection, security and the fight against drugs and organised crime. Europe is also about promoting a set of values and beliefs grounded on the European historical experience. It is about working with other countries and regions of the world, through effective multilateral institutions, to promote our core values and principles.

The fall of the Berlin Wall, the ending of the Cold War and the reunification of Europe have given our continent an unprecedented opportunity. The 460 million citizens of all 25 Member States can work together to develop a social Europe based on shared values and common objectives. We can collectively seize the opportunities and meet the challenges of a globalising world, particularly the rise of the Asian economies.

The European Constitution, unlike all the Treaties it replaces, sets out clearly what the citizens of Europe stand for and what their values are. It reflects the Union of values to which all Member States subscribe, namely: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

The Constitution also identifies the type of society that Europeans want – a society in which pluralism, non discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between men and women prevail.

In addition to establishing a Union of values, the Constitution also establishes a Union of rights. The incorporation of the Charter on Fundamental Rights into the European Constitution provides new rights for European citizens. Under the headings dignity, freedoms, equality, solidarity and citizens' rights, the Constitution sets out a series of rights that the Institutions of the Union must respect.

In keeping with Europe's strong commitment to the protection of the weak and vulnerable, to social

protection and cohesion and to the rights of workers, the Constitution provides for a Union based on solidarity. It includes the fight against social exclusion and discrimination among the objectives of the EU. It makes legal provisions for the promotion of equal treatment of women and men, solidarity between generations and the protection of the rights of the child. It includes commitments to social dialogue involving Trade Unions and the establishment of a Tripartite Social Summit.

The values, rights and commitment to solidarity, which are at the core of the Constitution, apply not only to the internal life of the Union; they also inspire the Union's engagement with the world. The Constitution provides that in its international relations, the Union will contribute to peace, security, sustainable development of the earth, solidarity and mutual respect among peoples, free and fair trade, eradication of poverty and protection of human rights, in particular the rights of the child.

I strongly believe that the most important provisions of the European Constitution, those that will have a real and lasting impact on the daily lives of the EU's citizens, are those that relate to values, rights and solidarity.

A vote on the European Constitution is, of course, a vote about the details of the EU's institutional organisation and decision making procedures. But it is also more than this. It is, essentially, a vote about the kind of EU that we want to have. A vote for the European Constitution is fundamentally a vote for common values, common objectives and the nature of the society we want to create in the unified Europe. It is a vote for the role we want Europe to play in the wider world, a role that reflects the most cherished values of European society.

Much attention has been focussed on detailed provisions of the European Constitution that facilitate decision making or make the EU more open, democratic and accountable. These provisions are important and represent significant progress. The amendment to the Irish Constitution that will be put to the people in our national referendum, will reflect the new provisions of the European Constitution. It will ensure that we can participate effectively in the future work of the Union under the European Constitution while, at the same time, fully recognising the prerogatives of the Oireachtas and the need to consult the people. It will not seek to close the door on future referendums on significant Treaty changes. Neither will it seek to give the Government a blank cheque to take decisions on highly sensitive and important issues in the EU without seeking Oireachtas approval.

The Constitution establishes the political framework for the continued success of the European Union. It is a document that empowers the peoples of Europe, their Parliaments and their Governments and inspires future policy and legislation. The Constitution is a creature of neither the left nor the right. It is up to Governments to decide on and implement its concrete policies. The nature of these policies will depend on the play of political forces around the negotiating table.

What the Constitution will do is ensure that we can continue to build a prosperous, peaceful Europe that is in the interest of every Member State and its people.

Ireland is in the almost unique position in the EU of having had national referendums on all of the key developments in European integration. We have learned the lesson that people's understanding and engagement in where Europe is going is fundamentally linked to the amount of information they have and the quality of the national debate.

We are now preparing for our national referendum on the European Constitution. The Government and the Referendum Commission will place as much factual information as possible before the public. The Forum on Europe has already done much to bring the issues to the people, including through regional meetings. I want to have a focussed, balanced and serious debate based on the facts and what is in the Constitution. I would like to hope that the debate could reflect the mature, modern, confident and economically successful Ireland that has both contributed to, and benefited from, European integration.

The eyes of Europe are now on France where a passionate national debate is raging. The outcome of the French referendum will undoubtedly have a profound influence over the future fate of the European

Constitution. The Union of rights, the Union of values and the Union based on solidarity owe much to France and French contributions to the negotiations on the European Constitution.

Having played a central role in the politically fraught negotiations that finally agreed the Constitution, I cannot see how we could ever go back to square one and negotiate a fresh Treaty. In my opinion, the Treaty now on the table is the closest we can come to a text where each Member State of the 25 finds a reflection of its own most closely-held beliefs and the protection of its core national interests.

I know that the European Movement will make a strong contribution to the national debate on the European Constitution. Your work will contribute to our common effort to demonstrate that Europe's agenda is our agenda, that what is good for Europe is good for Ireland.

Once again, I thank you for this Award, which, for me, recognises the work of many people over the past year. It also recognises a contribution that Ireland has made to the future development of the Union, a Union which has done so much to support our own national development.

Thank you.