

EU enlargement and Ireland's experience in the EU, focusing on the implications for political culture and sense of national identity

Remarks by the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese on the occasion of her visit to the University of São Paulo, Brazil, Friday, 26th March, 2004

Excelentíssimo Senhor Vice-Reitor Hélio Nogueira da Cruz, Excelentíssimo Senhor Professor Celso Lafer, senhoras e senhores, bom dia a todos.

It is a great honour for me to be here at the University of São Paulo (USP) today as part of my first visit to your wonderful country and this vibrant city. It is particularly good to be here as you celebrate the seventieth birthday of this illustrious university which has impressive cultural and educational links with Ireland dating back over many years, long preceding the establishment of our Irish Embassy in Brasilia in November 2001.

We are very grateful in Ireland to know that there has been an Irish Studies Programme here at the university going back more than two decades, to 1980.

I am following in the footsteps of our Taoiseach (Prime Minister) who visited this campus in the summer of 2001 so you can see how highly we respect this institution! For my own part, I am especially glad to be in São Paulo this year, on the 450th anniversary of the city, widely renowned as the “capital of South America”. USP is a byword for academic excellence in many fields and I am delighted to have the opportunity to address such a distinguished gathering.

It has become fashionable in Irish academic circles in recent times to organize conferences, and to publish books and articles, on the theme of “re-imagining” or “re-thinking” Ireland and it is not difficult to see why. Within a relatively short space of time – roughly co-terminous with our now thirty-year membership of the EU – Ireland has changed out of all recognition. Mono-causal explanations are never satisfactory or adequate but there is little doubt that the day our then poor and peripheral nation joined the then ECC was the day things started to change for the better. Today Ireland is the success story par excellence of the European Union, the country whose stellar economic makeover is a source of inspiration to the ten new countries lined up for admission to the Union on May 1st.

As that historic day looms I welcome this chance to address the issues of EU enlargement and the Irish experience of EU membership.

The planned enlargement constitutes one of the most exciting and positive developments since the Union's foundation in 1957. It is a resounding affirmation of the great and noble concept of the Union's founding fathers, formed when Europe lay in ruins after the two World Wars of the twentieth century: a concept dedicated to progress and partnership between free democratic nations, each exercising, but also pooling, its own sovereignty to create a consensus, with a view to guaranteeing stability, peace and shared prosperity.

In the words of historian John Gillingham "the spectre of war between the former European great powers has been banished" and while "the integration process has not always been smooth, neat, or pretty, or economically and politically costless, yet it has helped bring Europe to the cusp of a new era".

On May 1st, a little over a month from now, it will be Ireland's privilege, as Presidency of the European Union, to welcome the ten acceding States, not just as old friends, but as new partners. Each one of those States made enormous and testing strides in order to qualify for membership, and in doing so earned the respect and admiration of their European kin. They will bring a new dynamic to the Union for each has its own historic perspective, its distinctive identity and rich heritage, and its own particular way of looking at the world. One of the major challenges for the Irish Presidency, now, will be to manage the initial stages of the post-enlargement transition phase, while maintaining the momentum of the ongoing EU agenda which includes the finalisation of a new EU Constitution and progressing what we call the Lisbon Strategy, designed to make the EU the most dynamic and competitive knowledge based economy in the world.

In 1973, when, along with Britain and Denmark, Ireland joined the Union, (EEC) we saw membership as a stimulus for economic growth and development of our society. Equally importantly, we saw it, politically and psychologically, as a means of underpinning our independence generally, specifically, and lessening our economic dependence on Britain. By pooling elements of our hard-won national sovereignty, we believed that we would gain more effective control over our destiny than we would by standing alone and on the margins, and we have not been disappointed. A simple statistic can convey the extent of change on joining the European Economic Community, our GDP per capita was 60 percent of the Union average. Growth, mostly gained in the last decade has brought that figure closer to 130 percent. Predictably this rapid catch-up has attracted much international attention and provoked the coining of the phrase the "Celtic Tiger economy."

The evidence is in that the EU has been a powerful engine for economic and social progress in Ireland. Foreign direct investment has been a particular success story, unemployment has dropped from 20 percent to 4 per cent and a century and a half of outward migration by our people has been reversed.

Our membership of the European Union has not solely brought economic progress but has also helped accelerate the pace of positive social progress. Equal pay and opportunity for women, together with better conditions of employment generally, owe much to our membership of the European Union and the huge increase in the

participation of women in every sector of the economy has vastly increased our human equity resource base, releasing much previously wasted talent and creativity into every level of Irish life. As I like to put it, we are much closer to being a society that flies on two wings rather than floundering on one.

With the passage of time, it is easy to forget that the improvement in Ireland's fortunes was not an overnight phenomenon, nor was it accomplished without sacrifice. Membership, while providing the necessary foundation, structure, support and resources, did not in itself guarantee success. Rather, it provided opportunities – after that it was up to us, just as it is up to each Member State to use those opportunities wisely and well.

Among the opportunities presented to us by membership of this college of European nations has been the chance to make a significant contribution to Europe's development, to extend our global influence as a nation and to have a much more powerful voice at the international negotiating table than we would have outside the Union.

We are a nation with a rich ancient heritage, a cultural distinctiveness and a national identity forged over many difficult centuries when we were an oppressed and an unhappily colonised people. We fought hard for our freedom and for our sovereignty. Some people worried that our small nation would be culturally overwhelmed inside Europe. Thirty years later we know those worries were unfounded for there is today a surging cultural confidence and exuberance in Ireland and in our global Irish family. Many of our colleagues in Europe also have strong, proud cultures, France, Germany, Italy, the Iberian countries and now the incoming new members from Slovenia to Estonia. Working with them on a daily basis has been a very positive experience for us culturally, sharpening their curiosity about what it is to be Irish and our curiosity about the cultures of our brother and sister Europeans.

Working with our British counterparts has also created a much healthier relationship of trust and friendship between our two neighbouring but often not so neighbourly islands. Out of that improved relationship has evolved a Peace Process in Northern Ireland and an end to the violent conflict which political enmity between Ireland and Britain has caused for generations. So far from causing us to alter our sense of national identity, membership of an expanding Europe has helped us towards reclaiming our true identity, which for many years had been stifled, first by colonialism, then by a depressed post-colonial mentality.

Membership of the European Union has allowed us to remember anew our shared European history, the Irish monks who brought Christianity from an enlightened learned and scholarly Ireland to mainland Europe of the Dark Ages, the French and the Spaniards who tried to help us in our many fights against the might of the British Empire, the European neighbours who gave our people shelter and education through the atrocious Penal times, the Irish writers who travelled throughout Europe and who put the name of Ireland on the world's literature map – names like Joyce, Beckett, Yeats, Shaw and Oscar Wilde.

Joyce exemplifies the European aspect of Irish identity. International in his vision and impact, but always intellectually rooted in his native city of Dublin, Joyce could be said to represent the spirit of modern Ireland, confidently Irish, comfortably European, fearlessly global in outlook. It is fitting that the centenary of *Ulysses* will be celebrated around the world throughout the year – including here at USP in June.

Concluding Remarks

The Ireland Joyce left was considerably more mono-cultural and homogeneous than the Ireland of 2004. Nowadays our nation is seen as a land of opportunity and so Ireland is rapidly becoming a multicultural society, open to a panorama of cultural influences. Visiting a Dublin primary school a couple of weeks ago over one hundred of the four hundred children were non-nationals and between them they came from over twenty countries around the world. Just as the Irish who emigrated to America, Canada, Australia and Britain brought with them the gift of their food and drink, music, dance, poetry, stories and history, so too the newcomers to Ireland will enrich and deepen our culture with theirs.

On May 1st in Dublin we will host the Day of Welcomes when ten new nations become members of the European Union. Many of their names evoke memories of World War, of Communist domination, of desperate struggles for freedom – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia. The Czech Republic. The grim hand of history kept them under dark clouds for many years. Now they return to their natural family, their common European Homeland reminding a too comfortable generation, in case they forget, that this Union is a miracle. Out of the blood-soaked landscape of twentieth century Europe when neighbouring nations reduced each other to ashes, came the voice of sanity of the founding fathers of the Union – continue to fight each other and you will waste every childhood, consign every generation to misery. But if you work together, they said, you will reveal Europe's true strength and best destiny. They were right. There has never been a more prosperous, more confident, more educated Ireland nor a more peaceful Europe. The Union is our best gift ever to Europe's children. It is also of course an influential participant in international trade. We look forward to a brighter future as Europe and Mercosur (Mercosul) work for increased development and towards a fairer more humanly decent world for all.

Muito obrigada

Voices from Brazil

