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Beweging Voor de Verenigde Staten van Europa

Antwerpen 7 February 1998

I can explain my commitment to European integration very simply. Our European institutions are the only way to guarantee peace and democracy on our continent. It has taken us centuries to learn the lesson. It is important that we transmit what we learned to future generations.

It is fashionable nowadays to accuse those of us who insist upon the role of the EU as the guarantor of the peace as being behind the times or being irrelevant. I believe such criticism is profoundly misplaced.

The EU is the best example of conflict resolution in European history. It is a measure of its success that there is a tendency to take peace for granted. But it would be wrong to do so. Peace is not a possession one acquires permanently, it is a process which has to be worked at every day. It has to be maintained and overhauled every day. We can never be complacent about it.

From my perspective, there is, of course, little to be complacent about. Unlike the vast majority of our fellow citizens, in Northern Ireland, we have not enjoyed the same peaceful conditions which prevail throughout most of the European Union. If our conflict had been replicated throughout the EU, there would have been 600,000 deaths. Fortunately, the most rest of Europe has managed to live in peace while the conflict has raged in Northern Ireland

Furthermore, we have seen the murderous conflict in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia on our Eastern borders. There are numerous overt conflicts in the ex-Soviet Union and many more seething rivalries which we will have to resolve if the whole of the Europe is to enjoy the peace western Europe has experienced. It would be immoral for the EU to look at these conflicts on borders, breathe a sigh of relief and think - "There, but for the grace of God, go I." The relevance of the ideal of European unity remains as valid today as it was in the 1940s. The role of the European Union as a vehicle for the creation and preservation of peace is still fundamental. We should be proud of that fact. We should not hesitate to repeat this

fundamental truth at every possible opportunity, no matter what the cynical and complacent may say.

I can tell you that the experience of the European Union has been crucial in the efforts to bring about peace in Ireland. Firstly, the conflict in Ireland emerged in the context of the European rivalries of the seventeenth century. It is difficult to conceive of a solution except in the context of the new Europe of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Secondly, the rest of Europe has given us the inspiring example of the establishment of peace between bitterly divided and mutually hostile peoples, who have massacred each other frequently over the centuries. The battlefield has been replaced by the Parliamentary and Council chambers. Historically speaking, that is an amazing achievement. Indeed, if the EU did not exist, it would be hard to imagine that it could exist. That knowledge has inspired me and my colleagues in the darkest days of our conflict. Knowing that peace is a possibility has been a very powerful factor in our peace process. It has given us the strength to resist those who argue that we in Northern Ireland are condemned by birth to a future of conflict and despair.

We have also learned three more specific lessons from Europe- the recognition of diversity the advantages of integration over separatism, and the importance of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Accepting diversity is one of the keys to European integration. The EU has been so successful precisely because of the recognition, indeed the celebration, of diversity in its institutions and procedures. After all, the history of Europe is littered with bloody and futile attempts to impose unity and uniformity. This is, of course, a city which has suffered much historically from the continental and world wars associated with the effort to create a uniform Europe.

The true wisdom of the European movement of the second half of the 20th century has been to recognise that what makes us diverse does not divide us. Diversity has not been equated with division and disunity. Indeed the reverse is true. Diversity unites us. Diversity is what we all have in common. E Pluribus unum is the guiding principle of the United States of America. It is also the fundamental principle of the European Union.

For centuries diversity was seen as a threat. Although the principle of “one prince, one religion” was intended to maintain peace, it had the opposite effect. Outsiders were seen as enemies.

Our big step forward was to recognise that diversity is Europe’s greatest asset. That is a principle I will defend against anyone. To those who argue for homogeneity on political, religious or ethnic lines, we have to say that we have been down that road too often. We know where it leads - to conflict and destruction . Difference and diversity are fundamental elements of life, uniformity means death.

The mixture of cultures, economies and societies is what makes us so interesting. We have so many ways of doing things that we can experiment and innovate. We can learn from each other, learning not only from each other’s achievements but also from the mistakes. In a political framework which extends from the Arctic to Andalusia, we have to be positive about our differences and to make them work to our advantage.

Allied to the acceptance of diversity is the recognition of our interdependence. Not so long ago, our predecessors saw Europe in terms of an endless conflict. They assumed that what was in the interests of one state, or group of states, was contrary to the interests of others. A gain for one was a loss for another.

We have finally learnt that this was a mistake. What harms one state harms us all. Just one example, the recent earthquake in central Italy was obviously a tragedy for the victims. But it also involved serious damage to the cultural inheritance of the whole of Europe.

Similarly, we all gain when we cooperate. Our common policies enhance the position of all the member states. The classic example is the creation of the single market which has created more opportunities for everyone. In addition, we are all part of a global economy in which our position is clearly strengthened by our cohesion and collective action.

Yet another achievement of Europe has been the emphasis placed on the rule of law in the relations between different countries. For the first time, the relations between the peoples of the EU is determined by the rule of law. Europe is no longer dominated by power politics, force and aggression. Relations between our countries are determined by law, persuasion and reasoned argument. Of course, not every member state carries equal weight, but every member state has an equal voice. It is impossible for a member state to be systematically disadvantaged, even less so to be oppressed. That is an historic achievement which we should proclaim more often.

The EU has also been based on democracy and human rights. It is particularly important to us in Northern Ireland that the connection between democracy and human rights has been established. We still have many people who think democracy is simply a matter of numbers. Democracy is a great deal more complex than that. It must involve respect for the rule of the law, not just the presumed will of majorities. It must involve reasoned argument, not populist prejudice. Above all, it must include fairness to minorities. I think that Europe has shown what can be done in these respects. I very much hope that the lessons will also be learnt in the context of my own part of the European Union.

Coming from a region of the European Union which has never really fitted into the theory or the practice of the traditional nation-state, the issue of the role of the regions in Europe has been of particular importance. We have looked with interest at how other countries have dealt with regional and minority problems. Developments in, for example, the regions of Belgium and Spain have a particular significance for us. For these reasons, I and my colleagues have always advocated the case for a Europe of the regions. The principle of subsidiarity is very positive from our point of view. Within such a framework, with decisions taken at the relevant European, member state or regional level, we believe we have the best way for

overcoming both our economic and political difficulties.

The development of the Europe of the regions will allow us to involve local communities more directly in regenerating our economy and society. At the same time, involvement in Europe will provide powerful incentives to avoid provincialism and allow us to play a full role in the global economy.

I would like to end with the expression of Northern Ireland's gratitude for the deep interest our colleagues in this country and region, as well as throughout the European Union, have taken in our problems. There is much talk of the concept of "solidarity" within the European Union. We have been the beneficiaries in very practical terms. We are deeply grateful for the consistent support the EU has given to the search for peace in Ireland. Successive Presidents of the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament have backed the peace process, not just through political declarations but also through their serious personal involvement. In particular, the special EU programme for peace and reconciliation has been an imaginative and very successful initiative, demonstrating to our people how much our fellow Europeans are concerned about the absence of peace in Ireland.

My hope is that we can repay that faith in us, that Northern Ireland can become a normal, mainstream part of the EU. I am committed to building new institutions which will become a model for divided societies. I therefore hope that we will be in a position to play a very supportive role in the integration into the EU of new member states whose history, like ours, has not been as positive, as that of western Europe over the last few decades.