

October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009

**Remarks by President Mary McAleese “Ireland and the EU” Abbaye de Neumünster, Luxembourg**

Prime Minister, Excellencies, distinguished guests, good afternoon.

Thank you, Prime Minister, for your kind introduction. I am delighted to be here with you today in the historic surroundings of the Abbaye de Neumünster.

Martin and I are greatly enjoying this State visit to Luxembourg and even in the short space of two days we have covered enough ground to heighten our appreciation of Luxembourg’s rich history and culture and its contemporary dynamism. In particular we have been moved by the handshakes and smiles of welcome received from so many of Luxembourg’s citizens.

For my own part, I looked forward to this visit as a return to a place I had visited both in my career as an academic lawyer and as President on official visits to the European institutions. It is a place associated deeply in my mind with the workings of the EU for here the legal texts that define the Union come to life and the workings of its institutions are part of the fabric of the everyday. It was natural then that this visit would present an occasion to reflect on Ireland’s relations with the European Union and with our partners in Europe.

This is a particularly good setting in which to do so, for this beautiful Abbey is of course associated with the very first Irish ambassadors to this part of Europe, the monks who came from Ireland who in the 7th and 8th centuries established universities and centres of learning all over this continent, some quite close to here. Less edifying though is its more recent history as a place of transit for deportees during the Nazis occupation. These contradictory images of the light and darkness of which humanity is capable are important drivers of the great project that is the European Union, an adventure in partnership, democracy and equality undertaken by sovereign states with long and recent histories of bitter enmity and conflict, our collective bulwark against the triumph of darkness, our pledge to do what we can to ensure the triumph of the light.

Yesterday I gazed across the old town in the Grund to the base of the Kirchberg Plateau, towards the small house where on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June 1886 Robert Schuman was born to a French father and a Luxembourgish mother. He himself said it was not by chance, “that the idea of a community of steel, iron and coal comes from a Luxembourgish boy whose parents have lived what war is”. And from the European Coal and Steel Community set out in the Schuman Plan has evolved the unique and successful experiment in pooling national sovereignty that is the EU today.

Ireland was not there at its creation. Our long, unhappy relationship with our colonial neighbour, Britain and our violent, lone struggle for independence had led to a certain introspection and distraction. However a recent book by Michael Geary called “An Inconvenient Wait”, tells of those in Ireland who clearly saw the potential of this new European organisation, and who were dismayed that extraneous factors, not least the relationship between France and Britain, could delay its realisation.

Ireland became strongly convinced of the moral, political and social integrity of the European Community and it was a predecessor of mine, Patrick Hillery, who as Irish Foreign Minister, came to Luxembourg in 1970 to present our case for membership. Accession followed in 1973 and on President Hillery's State Visit here in 1978, in commenting on Luxembourg's role as a founder of the Community, he said: "Europe is fortunate in having such an energetic and talented people at its heartland." I can happily repeat and reinforce those sentiments today.

Ireland's membership of the now European Union has gone hand in hand with quite an extraordinary metamorphosis in our country.

We entered a poor and underachieving country but our economy, like Luxembourg's, grew rapidly in the decades following accession, thanks in large part to the EU's common policies, financial support for infrastructure projects that have helped us to attract valuable and high-calibre foreign direct investment and the opportunities for our businesses in the single market.

It is appropriate to mention here the European Investment Bank, headquartered in Luxembourg, and its vital and continuing role in lending for productive investment in Ireland and other member States.

Today our business people and citizens enjoy all the benefits and reduced transaction costs of a single currency, the euro, circulating now in 16 member States and playing a key global role. Luxembourg had been something of a laboratory for monetary union with its experience of the Zollverein and it was your Prime Minister, Pierre Werner, who in the 1970s analysed the issues and options for the gradual achievement of economic and monetary union. That connection between Luxembourg leaders and the European currency continues today, with the name of Prime Minister Jean Claude Juncker being almost synonymous with the euro.

Entering European Monetary Union was a big step for Ireland, a break with the past. The reassurance that it now provides in these difficult economic times is a significant benefit. The European Central Bank has made great efforts to ensure banking systems that are stable and liquid in a period of sometimes intense pressures and in so doing has demonstrated the value of being part of a large single currency area.

A further aspect of the change wrought in Ireland through EU membership has been in the growth of political and even one might say psychological independence as a nation. Joining the EEC did not diminish our sovereignty; on the contrary, the pooling of some elements of it added to its scope and force, opening us up to the possibility of contributing our voice on a much vaster canvas and to a much wider audience. We grew in experience and confidence through our dealings with new partners, large and small, and in particular, membership brought about a healthy transformation in our relationship with Britain. This last phenomenon has had hugely significant consequences for the building of peace in Northern Ireland.

The multi-faceted role of the European Union in the successful pursuit of peace and stability on the island of Ireland rarely receives the full credit it deserves. The EU has been persistent in its commitment to peace and prosperity on the island. It has been a

friend in good times and in bad, never taking its eyes off the prize of peace, prosperity and reconciliation. As someone who grew up in Northern Ireland, I witnessed a society so wrapped up in its own warped history of continual sectarian and political hurt and reprisals that it seemed unable to break free from its past. The knot of history was pulled tight and what started to loosen it was the fact that Ireland and Britain's membership of the European Union provided a new landscape for encounter and engagement. Those meetings around the EU table established trust and even friendship, remarkably during the worst years of the Troubles and it was those very close working relationships which facilitated the partnership approach to peace building which is distilled in the Good Friday Agreement and is an essential and effective component of its implementation.

The EU has also over many decades provided meaningful financial and practical support for reconciliation, allowing communities to reach across divides and to participate directly in the process of peace building, as well as assisting in the social and economic development in Northern Ireland and the border region of Ireland. Slowly, slowly, one person at a time our Union has helped cultivate a culture of good neighbourliness in place of the miserable old culture of conflict. Today, as the Northern Ireland Executive and other institutions get on with the business of government and as cross-border political relationships flourish as never before, the European Union is continuing its concrete commitment towards peace and reconciliation through the PEACE III programme until 2013. The once fragile plant of peace grows more robust daily but still needs careful gardeners and the Union has been and remains a very careful gardener.

As Ireland was changing of course, the Union did not stay still and one of the most wonderful privileges for me was that gloriously sunny day in May 2004 when the leaders of Europe gathered at my official residence in Dublin to welcome 10 new member States, a moment of history that would have been dismissed as pure fantasy when the Treaty of Rome was signed in 1957. You could almost hear the doors of history clanging shut and the windows opening to let a new future in as artificial estrangements and divisions melted away in the face of this great family reunion and reconciliation.

Eurobarometer and other opinion polls leave no doubt that Ireland is an overwhelmingly enthusiastic member of the Union. Just two weeks ago the people of Ireland voted two to one in favour of the Lisbon Treaty having previously rejected it. It was and remains very important to understand that first No vote in 2008, for by no stretch of the imagination and some people's imaginations were at fever pitch, could it or should it have been interpreted as a vote against the Union. It was, as is now very evident, mostly the expression of concern about certain elements in the Treaty of particular moment or worry to the Irish people. Once those concerns were patiently, forensically analysed and explained by our Government, they were understood and accommodated by our Union partners so that the Irish people were sufficiently reassured to give the Treaty their wholehearted endorsement. No other European treaty has ever received as many yes votes in Ireland as the Lisbon Treaty did two weeks ago. Those who insisted on seeing the episode as a disaster for Europe were far from correct, for the democratic and consensus-based credentials of the Union and its sensitivity to the customised needs of each of its sovereign members, its assertion of

the value of the voice of its citizens, have all proved their worth, their strength, their integrity and ultimately their unity of purpose.

I am particularly glad today to have an opportunity to recall the humour and good sense at the time of Jean Claude Juncker, who said “there are no big democracies and small democracies, and there is no Europe without Ireland.” These were important, fair and temperate words, which offered hope at a moment of uncertainty and pointed towards solutions.

Now, hopefully we can all move on, all the stronger for the learning process and the lessons learnt, some of which are worth reflecting on.

The first lesson is not unfamiliar and is in danger of becoming a wearying cliché: all of us benefit greatly from improved communication and education about the EU. We are now half a billion citizens, a plethora of languages, cultures, perspectives and identities. We do not yet all know or understand each other well. We often share perplexity about the workings of our Union and an expressed sense of remoteness from its institutions. Crash courses or cramming to meet the needs of particular issues is unlikely to properly address the communications or trust deficit. Nor is there any easy solution beyond a hard two-way slog.

Europe’s citizens have a personal and civic responsibility to inform themselves and make themselves educated about these matters.

The human right of all European citizens to have a voice in our own affairs was not always respected throughout history. It is important that when we vote that it is our voice and not a borrowed voice or a complacent voice that we are using; that it is a well-informed and educated voice which is capable of distinguishing the wheat from the chaff.

Our EU institutions and national administrations have a responsibility to use every form of media to deliver comprehensible and accessible information to our citizens on an ongoing basis so that a positive and actively engaged European consciousness forms part of everyday life and discourse. That is no small demand but it is essential, and we pay a price for either doing it badly or not doing it at all. We can say that Ireland’s recent experience shows that with real effort there can be an energetic mobilisation of civic society, the political establishment and the media.

Once ratification of the Lisbon Treaty is secured, our Union will be free to concentrate its efforts on the issues that are coming between many of Europe’s citizens and their night’s sleep: the economic down turn, job and money worries, the reducing landscape of opportunity, the runaway giddiness of the banking and building sectors, the weakness of controls and prognoses and the rapidity with which the toxin of failure coursed through the global and many national marketplaces. Then there are urgent issues to do with global warming, with climate change and the environment, with wars and threats of war, with terrorism and fear of terrorism, with the endemic poverty, disease and political corruption which holds parts of the developing world from developing properly or even at all. In our pursuit of answers and solutions our European Union is our bulwark, our strength, our source of courage, creativity and momentum.

With its knowledge base and expertise, the European Union has a huge reservoir to draw on as we struggle to cope with our national problems and a huge reach in dealing with global issues on our behalf. It is a centre of principled gravity, guided by a fidelity to human rights and egalitarian democracy, insistent on the rule of law and a place of true, active human solidarity. When the people of Ireland meet their neighbours from Luxembourg, they know that no matter the differences of language or culture, these noble values, distilled from our bitter experience and our love of humanity, are bonds which unite us and forge us into a benign force to be reckoned with in the world. These are all areas where our two countries have worked together in the past, combining our voices and those of our partners to be comprehensively more effective in the world together than we could ever be alone. Once the innovations from the Lisbon Treaty take effect, Europe's citizens can look forward to streamlined institutions, an enhanced role for the European Parliament and national parliaments, new visible figures to represent the EU internationally and an External Action Service – all of which will make the same voice of the Union and its constituent member states much more audible in a troubled and troubling world.

My final reflection arising from the ratification process concerns the solidarity between member states and the role of the EU institutions. I referred earlier to Luxembourg's thoughtful and helpful reaction after the 2008 "No" vote in Ireland. The Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs has said "we have good friends in the Union and I am conscious of the distance that many of them travelled to accommodate our people's concerns." That solidarity and understanding is part and parcel of the working core of the EU. We are a large family, made up of very individual and distinctive members and the strength we have is our ability to keep that family functioning as one unit while maintaining the rich individualism that creates its genius and its dynamic. In his memoirs Jean Monnet recalled that "quite early in life, events taught me that human nature is weak and unpredictable without rules and institutions". The simple mechanism designed to give the Coal and Steel Community the necessary independence for its work while acknowledging the sovereignty to each member state, can still be traced in the more elaborate and extensive institutional architecture of today's Union, which maintains both the integrity of the Union and the integrity of the rights of each and every Member State. The consensus we aspire to in the Union is not a consensus of clones but quite the opposite, a consensus hammered out across history, geography, culture, religion, language, identity and differentials of wealth and poverty, a rich and imaginative consensus informed by many perspectives and experiences but ultimately wrapping all of us who are Europe's citizens in the mantle of a shared peaceful and prosperous future, for which we work conscientiously together in the difficult present.

I am deeply conscious during this visit of being on what will in time come to be seen as the Union's holy ground, for here we find the traces of its humble but hope-filled beginnings in the Hotel de Ville where the installation of the High Commission of the ECSC took place in 1952 and the Cercle Municipal, the first home of the Court of Justice of the Coal and Steel Community. These sites reinforce Luxembourg's position as the original capital of Europe, and your continuing central role in hosting EU institutions speaks of a place that Europe looks to for leadership and inspiration. The Court of Auditors which I have had the pleasure of visiting on another occasion, assures our Union's citizens that their money, disbursed as EU funds, is being

properly and well spent. Eurostat's data and statistics service helps us plan efficiently and intelligently.

But beyond institutions and treaties it is Europe's citizens whose hearts and hands are crafting this still young project we call the European Union. Both Luxembourg and Ireland, have produced great champions of Europe and in this city I think especially of Pierre Werner, Gaston Thorn and Jacques Santer each of whom has left such a valuable imprint. We can also say proudly that Luxembourg and Irish nationals have a formidable reputation for the energy and distinction they bring to senior posts in the European Civil Service. Our talents seem to flourish in that environment, a product perhaps of the adaptability and openness that both our peoples display.

Luxembourg is now called on to be host and home to the Union personnel who work here from all parts of the Union and the many visitors who come here like me on official business. What President Hillery said in his 1978 visit rings just as true now – “what is unique”, he said, “about Luxembourg is that it combines the sophistication and urbanity of a great international centre with the gentleness and hospitality usually associated with more sheltered places.” Finding that mix has been a centuries' long process, not an overnight wonder. Mixing between Ireland and Luxembourg has also been going on for well over a thousand years yet as the Irish proverb says “ní heolas go haontíos” — you don't know someone till you live under the same roof. Since 1973 Ireland and Luxembourg have lived and worked together under the same European roof. Our old roots of friendship grew new and fresh shoots and we discovered a mutuality as well as a mutual vocation in Europe and in the world. Our children are co-citizens of a free Europe, an egalitarian Europe and a peaceful Europe.

Their parents and especially their grandparents dreamed of such things but believing them to be impossible now see them for the miracle they are.

Ours is not a perfect Union but it is still a massive advance on the misery and dysfunction that characterized the European family of nations until just a short time ago, and it is today still only in the opening early chapters of its remarkable new history. Ireland and Luxembourg are privileged to be among the scriptwriters of that history along with twenty-five partners and a queue of applicants who see our Union as the future. As we struggle to get through the economic mire of the moment, it is worth lifting our eyes to the far horizon beyond today's preoccupations to a world where step by step, hand in hand Europe's citizens planted a new decency on our continent and in our world and watched it lift humanity from misery to miracle.

Merci, villmols.