CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Distinguished Members of the European Economic and Social Committee,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

I would like to thank you for the invitation here today, and also welcome you all to Castleknock in the heart of my own constituency.

Castleknock was once a rural village on the outskirts of Dublin, a situation that began to change in the late 1960s when a period of rapid development began and the village eventually became a suburb of the city.

In some ways, that mirrors Ireland’s relationship with the EU.

Upon entry in 1973, Ireland developed at pace and benefitted hugely from being part of a prosperous and stable bloc.

But change also brings new challenges.
It may interest you to know that about one-third of the population of my constituency are immigrants who arrived to work in Ireland during the height of the boom.

That was a welcome development, but created pressures on local schools, with up to 40 different nationalities in some classes.

But the teachers, and the parents and children themselves, did a fantastic job of rising to that challenge and overcoming language barriers.

The EU, similarly, has always been about overcoming barriers – be they language or economic or political ones – to the benefit of the entire continent.

Today, I’d like to talk a little of the benefits of Ireland’s EU membership and also how we see our Presidency unfolding.

**Our commitment**

Firstly, let me reiterate our strong commitment to the Union.

That commitment is based on our shared values.

The European project ensured our continent moved away from war.

The significance of that tectonic shift, and the decades of peace and prosperity that followed, is sometimes lost.

I found the recent events to mark the 50th anniversary of the Elysee Treaty – which sealed the alliance of France and Germany after two wars – deeply symbolic.

Today, as Europe grapples with the financial crisis, the underlying value of Union can easily be forgotten.

The Schumann declaration stated that:
“The contribution which an organised and living Europe can bring to civilisation is indispensable to the maintenance of peaceful relations.”

It also said that:

“Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan” but only “built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity”.

We should remember those words, and the strength of what binds us as a Union, as we try to navigate our way – together – out of the current crisis.

It’s not alone about shared values, of course, but shared benefits.

Membership has helped to transform Ireland economically, politically and socially.

It was the EU which forced successive Irish governments to move on key issues of interest to women.

For example, equal pay for equal work was a principle enshrined in the Treaties of Rome, and helped to narrow the gender pay gap.

The EU pushed equality up the agenda, to the benefit of millions of women in this country.

But the current crisis has obscured the fact that the EU has been a force for good.

The crisis has seen public trust slip at national and EU levels. We need to act to restore that trust and to empower our citizens.

As you know, 2013 is the European Year of Citizens and we want to encourage a debate about what it means to be part of the European Union.

We need greater engagement by citizens across the EU on the issues that affect us all today.
This process started with the successful launch of the European Year of Citizens and the Citizens’ Dialogue in Dublin in January.

In this context, I would like to welcome our cooperation with European Movement Ireland in promotion of public discussion about the EU.

Let me also applaud the role played by the European Economic and Social Committee - and in particular its Group III - in representing the voice of civil society in the Union’s decision-making process.

I would like to pay a particular tribute to the contribution of Senator Jillian van Turnhout to the work of the Committee over many years.

I also welcome the constructive engagement by the Committee with the Irish Presidency and for their agreement to prepare an Opinion on the complex question of how our electricity systems can deal with the increase in the use of renewable technologies.

This is a very tangible and practical example of how the Committee contributes to the formation of policy at EU level that can deliver real benefits to all our citizens.

**Irish Presidency**

The launch phase of the Presidency is already behind us and now we are actively engaged in the day-to-day business of the Presidency.

We are guided in this by our Presidency programme which focuses on three key elements – *stability, jobs and growth*.

We hear about those topics from citizens every day and it is not only about an economic agenda, it is also a political and social imperative.

The European project began with coal and steel. Today, in every sense, it must be about citizens and society.
Because if the EU had a failing, it was that it allowed the doctrine of market fundamentalism to dominate.

The salutary lesson is that we cannot allow the financial markets, or the wealthy elites, to dictate our future.

The likes of Jacques Delors did not merely anticipate a European economic powerhouse built on a single free market.

He envisaged a Union where the citizen was at its heart and fairness its guiding principle.

Our citizens want to see the EU respond effectively – and fairly - to the current crisis and a return to stability and growth.

**Jobs and Growth**

Which brings me to the single most pressing issue facing Europe today - the scandalous level of unemployment, particularly among our young people.

Some member states are experiencing unemployment levels above 25% and youth unemployment levels of double that.

This is an existential crisis for the EU, and one that requires us to revisit the true principles of Union.

We have to give people hope for the future and we have to avoid the creation of a lost generation.

That is why I have placed such a priority on securing agreement on the Youth Employment package - including a Youth Guarantee.

Under such a guarantee, a young person under 25 would be guaranteed a job, training or educational place within a set number of months of becoming unemployed.
This week, EU social protection and employment ministers will gather in Dublin to discuss these issues.

I look forward to chairing the negotiations and am confident that, over the term of our Presidency, we can achieve a successful outcome.

During our Presidency, Ireland will also work to promote greater equality, social cohesion and inclusion in Europe.

We will:

- Seek to address measures outstanding under the current Single Market Act in order to boost growth, competitiveness and employment.
- Seek to promote the digital economy and the Digital Single Market.
- Seek to underpin and stimulate research and innovation across the EU by advancing agreement on the Horizon 2020 framework programme.
- Hold several conferences in Ireland during the Presidency aimed at maximising the EU’s innovation and research capabilities.
- Prioritise the external trade agenda and host a meeting of trade ministers which will focus in particular on the EU-US trade relationship. This meeting may contribute to securing the formal Council mandate for the start of negotiations on a comprehensive EU-US Free Trade Agreement (FTA).
- Seek to advance Free Trade Agreement negotiations with Japan, India and other strategic partners.
- Seek to support the SME sector by making progress on programmes like COSME which seek to facilitate access by SMEs to EU funding.

**Economic Governance and stability**

Of course, much of what I have outlined will not have the desired effect unless we generate consumer, business and investor confidence in the European
economy by restoring stability.

Over the past two years, Europe has adopted a broad range of tools to address economic governance issues within the Union.

What we need now is effective implementation.

This is why we will be seeking to manage as efficiently as possible the European Semester process of economic and budgetary coordination.

This will help to ensure that Member States stay on track to reach their agreed targets of sustainable economic growth and social cohesion under the Europe 2020 Strategy.

We will also work to make good progress on the Banking Union proposals which are necessary to restore stability and confidence to the financial services sector.

In particular, we must give effect to the crucial June 29 summit decision to break the disastrous link between banking debt and the sovereign.

We are currently pressing ahead on the proposed Supervisory Framework as a matter of priority.

**Multiannual Financial Framework**

Ireland believes that the Union requires a budget that is both fit for purpose and that can support economic recovery and growth.

The European Council in November made considerable progress in narrowing the very large differences between Member States on the Multiannual Financial Framework.

But more work is needed and soon.

The Irish Presidency will do everything that it can to promote agreement on this issue.
We have assured President Van Rompuy of the Presidency’s full support in his efforts to finalise agreement on the MFF and we hope this can be achieved next week if all Member States show sufficient good will, and flexibility.

Assuming that we can successfully reach agreement and secure the assent of the European Parliament, it will fall to us as Presidency to advance the wide range of implementing legislation on behalf of the Council.

Important work on CAP and CFP reform, Horizon 2020 and on structural funds needs early attention.

**Europe and the World**

In the foreign affairs area we will work to support the work of High Representative Ashton and the EEAS, particularly in pursuing the Union’s values of democracy, respect for individual rights and human rights abroad.

We look forward to preparing for Croatia’s accession in July 2013 and in making good progress on moving the broader enlargement agenda forward.

Ireland has always placed a strong value on development aid.

I spent several years working in Africa, and later as a minister in the 1990s, oversaw a dramatic expansion in Ireland’s aid programme.

I know at first-hand the importance of the contribution made by Ireland and like-minded countries.

But I also know we have to focus on delivering coordinated, coherent programmes which both support vulnerable and poor communities but also assists in capacity building.

We look forward to making progress on areas including improved coordination of Member State policies to deliver better results.

The Presidency will also place an emphasis on addressing the linkages between
hunger, nutrition and climate change, and will host an international conference on this issue in Dublin in April 2013.

Concluding remarks

Ireland has developed a reputation for running fair and impartial Presidencies since its first EU Presidency in 1975. We will seek to repeat this in 2013.

We have always believed that the EU is at its strongest and successful when it moves forward together.

We also believe that the Community method of decision-making serves the Union well.

Ireland will work hard to keep the institutional machinery of the EU moving ahead to deliver tangible results for Europe’s citizens.

Our Presidency programme is ambitious.

At the same time, as Hillary Clinton pointed out when she visited Dublin recently, politics has to be a combination of ambitious and realism.

We will seek to strike the right balance between both.

I can assure you we will always be an honest broker – open and transparent with a firm focus on results.

We will also look to the European Economic and Social Committee for your continued guidance and support.

Today is St Brigid’s Day in Ireland, when we celebrate one of our patron saints and the start of spring.

The Irish poet Raftery said when spring would come, he would set his sail.

The Union has seen troubled times of late but can and will set sail together for a brighter future.
Thank you for your attention.