Address by

President Michael D. Higgins

‘Towards a European Union of the Citizens’

European Parliament

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Mr. President, Members of the European Parliament,
Commissioner Geoghegan Quinn, may I thank you for giving me the opportunity of addressing this assembly which brings together the democratically, directly elected, representatives of the citizens of the 27 member states, soon to be 28, of the European Union.

I address you mar Uachtarán na hÉireann, as President of Ireland, an island that has always been connected to matters European; a country that has always looked outward; a people with a very strong connection with the cultures and learning of Europe in all its diversity from ancient times; and a nation that has valued that European vocation through every century into the present when Ireland holds, for the seventh time, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in our fortieth year of membership of the Union.

Be it in our ancient Celtic connections, in our continuous connection with European scholarship, or in our modern consistent support for European unity we Irish have been
European in our consciousness and commitment. Europe has always had an existence in the Irish mind.

- In our own Gaelic language the mythic stories of Europe have always been present and some of our modern plays recall the use that was made of the classical sources of Greek and Roman myths in the Gaelic hedge schools that preceded the widespread use of the English language. The Irish language that preceded English had been deeply influenced by ancient European myths, particularly the great myths of sea and exile such as that of Homer's Odyssey. In the areas of literature, the peoples of Europe have had an old and enduring sense of respect for what is a cultural diversity frequently drawn from a shared body of myth.

- It was, however, in the tasks of the mind and the spirit that the Irish sought to make their greatest contribution. Thus it was that in July 1950 the then Irish Prime Minister, John A. Costello, together with the Irish Foreign Minister, Nobel Peace Laureate, and founding member of Amnesty International, Sean McBride travelled to Luxeuil-Les-Bains to officially celebrate the 1400th anniversary of the birth of one of the greatest Irish and European saints and scholars, Columbanus. It was Columbanus who with St. Gall and others established centres of learning, manuscript illumination, monasteries and communities right across Europe from the North of Ireland to Bobbio, where Columbanus actually died.
- It is of the spirit of citizenship as it might be at a European level, as might motivate Europeans who want to give the two words – European and Union – a sense of fulfilment, and of human flourishing that I wish to speak of in this year that has been dedicated as “**European Year of Citizens**”.

- But one more word about that meeting in Luxeuil-Les-Bains in July 1950. No more than some meetings of the contemporary period, its real agenda was not as publicly indicated. It was declared to be ecclesiastical in purpose; after all, the Papal Nuncio to France, Monsignor Roncalli, later to be Pope John XXIII, was present, as was the Bishop of Bobbio. But we now know, from the work of the distinguished scholar of the Sorbonne Marguerite Marie Dubois, modernist, linguist, philosopher and lexicographer, that the meeting was really organized so as to facilitate a meeting of Robert Schuman, Foreign Minister of France, with like minded others from a number of European countries anxious to hear and test his great idea for the coming together of the countries of Europe.

- Schuman, who was aware of it, reached back to recall the early monastic perigrinatio and declared Columbanus to be **“the patron saint of all those who now seek to build a united Europe”**.

- The Schuman meeting, and the others which followed it, assisted by such as Jean Monnet, was responding to near and terrible events. But we should never forget, and I emphasize it
today, that in their response they recognized its immense value, and drew on, the rich scholarship, philosophy, moral instincts and generous impulses of European thought as they sought, not only to replace war with peace, but more importantly, to construct a vision of Europe’s people working together in an inclusive way. It was not any abstract construction. It was a practical proposal drawn from the head, propelled by the heart, and uniting economy and ethics in its aspiration.

- Yet the inspiration and the achievements of the founders of the European Union we inherit as legacy cannot be taken for granted. Today, citizens in Europe are threatened with an unconscious drift to disharmony, a loss of social cohesion, a recurrence of racism and an increasing deficit of democratic accountability in some decision making of an economic and fiscal kind. These threatening clouds hang over a Europe that in more hopeful times, chose to base its anthem, rather than on anything contemporary, on Friedrich Schiller’s poem ‘Ode to Joy’ and its musical setting by Ludwig Van Beethoven in his Ninth Symphony.

- Parliaments do matter and must continue to matter. Centuries of effort have been invested by European citizens in securing the vote. It is to parliament citizens look for accountability, for strategic alternatives. If national parliaments, if the European Parliament, were to lose the capacity to deliver accountability where else might it be found? Is there an alternative that can
meet the requirements of a deliberative democracy? I believe not and parliaments must draw on the resources of experience, of inherited intellectual capacity, in all its diversity and above all, from the best of contemporary intellectual work in a pluralist way.

I am conscious, in this year of the European Citizen, that as Parliamentarians you are the elected component of the European Union, elected by citizens from diverse electorates within the same days. I want to wish you well in all your deliberations together and with the other institutions of the Union and particularly in your dialogue with your electorate – the citizens of Europe. They, the citizens, place their trust in parliament when they vote and they rightly have expectations of parliaments responding to their needs. I very much welcome too the increase in influence and decision-making powers that the European Parliament, since I visited as Minister and as President of the Council of Culture Ministers in 1996 has won in relation to the multi-annual budgeting process and wish you well in discharging that responsibility on behalf of the citizens of Europe.

How would the founders of the European Union respond to our present circumstances you might ask?

We know how hard the institutions, including this one, have worked to overcome the most serious economic crisis the Union
has faced since its’ foundation; how they have struggled to match the speed of their reaction to the ferocity of its onslaught and that onslaught comes at times from sources that are not accountable.

- We cannot, however, ignore the fact that European citizens are suffering the consequences of actions and opinions of bodies such as rating agencies, which, unlike Parliaments, are unaccountable. Many of our citizens in Europe regard the response to the crisis in their lives as disparate, sometimes delayed, not equal to the urgency of the task and showing insufficient solidarity with them in their threatened or actual economic circumstances.

- They feel that in general terms the economic narrative of recent years has been driven by dry technical concerns; for example, by calculations that are abstract and not drawn from real problems, geared primarily by a consideration of the impact of such measures on speculative markets, rather than driven by sufficient compassion and empathy with the predicament of European citizens who are members of a union, and for whom all of the resources of Europe’s capacity, political, social, economic and intellectual might have been drawn on, driven by the binding moral spirit of a union.
In facing up to the challenges Europe currently faces, particularly in relation to unemployment, we cannot afford to place our singular trust in a single hegemonic model to the exclusion of others that might engage best problems such as unemployment in a version of a logistical, economic theory whose assumptions are narrow and questionable and largely indifferent to social consequences in terms of their outcomes.

Instead of any discourse that might define the European Union as simply an economic space of contestation between the strong and the weak, our citizens yearn for the language of solidarity, the commitment to cohesion, for a generous inclusive rhetoric that is appropriate to an evolving political union that is anxious to reach a future of peace, prosperity, inclusion, and in a sustainable way.

This is a serious challenge, not least because if we were to fail we run the risk of an economic crisis leading to a crisis of legitimacy for the Union. A Union that in its founding treaties is fundamentally founded on values – respect for personal dignity; freedom; democracy; equality; the rule of law and respect for human rights.

The Union draws its legitimacy from the support of its citizens. That connection with the citizens – their belief that the European Union is of them and for them – is fundamental. Without it, we are adrift and citizens need an appeal to their
heart as well as their reason. They need reassurance now that
the Union will keep faith with its founding treaties.

- It is many years since Jacques Delors declared "Europe needs a
  soul", but it remains just as true. We should never forget that
we are the inheritors of a profoundly important set of European
values – Greek democracy, Roman law, the Judeo-Christian
tradition, the reformation, the enlightenment, the great
democratic revolution that began in France. Europe is
therefore more than an economic space of contestation in which
our citizens are invited or required to deliver up their lives in
the service of an abstract model of economy and society whose
core assumptions they are assumed not to question or put to the
democratic test in elections.

- As we face into the future, we need to draw strength from the
  founding values of the Union and these include cohesion and
solidarity – among Member States, among the citizens of our
Union, and between the European Union and the rest of the
world. We need to work together to apply ourselves to building
a better future together – as Jacques Delors also said of this
present crisis "Europe does not just need fire-fighters, it needs
architects too".

- A first and urgent task must be to get Europe back to
  sustainable and fulfilling employment and a return to real
growth. There is nothing more corrosive to society and more
crushing to an individual than endemic unemployment, particularly among the young. Today there are 26 million people across the Union without work, 5.7 million young people, and 115 million in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion. We cannot allow this to continue.

- Irish Presidencies have always drawn practically from the spirit of the founding treaties and the current Irish Presidency has put job creation right at the top of the agenda. The European Council has agreed that addressing unemployment is the most important social challenge we face. At last month’s Social Summit, you, Mr President, rightly warned of the repercussions of the spread of unemployment and poverty across the Union.

- I commend the agreement reached in the European Council in February on the Youth Employment Initiative, and the subsequent proposals from the Commission to make it operational by the start of next year. I also very much welcome the agreement reached in the Council on the Youth Guarantee that will ensure all young people under the age of 25 receive a good quality offer of employment, education, apprenticeship or training within four months of being unemployed.

- But we need to do more. We need to ensure that women participate in the workplace as equals; that older workers are not left on the sidelines; and that the long-term unemployed are
fully equipped to find their way back into today’s work place. We must, above all, ensure that, for all these European citizens that a loss of employment does not lead to exclusion from participation, particularly in the cultural space of one’s community.

- We need also to consider how to encourage people to create jobs. We need to value and support our Small and Medium sized Enterprises, the lifeblood of so many of our communities. We need to sustain those that want to create opportunity for themselves and for others. We need to encourage creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship.

- A generous vision of Europe is, of course, not one that looks solely inwards. The European model has inspired many others on their journey to peace and democratic institutions. While its light may not have dazzled as brightly in recent years, Europe can yet be a beacon of hope and encouragement for many less fortunate people in the world. It can give a lead, for example, by speaking with a unified voice on climate change, recognizing that those least contributing to our global problem are paying the highest price, even as we meet today. Europe already is the largest donor in the fight against hunger and in the efforts at scaling up nutrition and Europe can build on that.

- How the European Union engages with the rest of the world is a major test of its authority and credibility. Will the Union
allow its current economic difficulties to undermine its commitment on the great global challenges of our day – hunger, poverty, human rights, climate justice? I hope not. Will we reaffirm the generous idealism at the heart of the European vision by rededicating ourselves to tackling these problems in solidarity with other partners? I hope we do.
The measures that replace the Millennium Development Goals - how they respect diversity, recognize different paths to development and have human rights at their centre - will be a major test for Europe and the global community.

- I believe that a European Union that has the courage to face all of its past, including its darker periods of empire, with honesty, and its future with a commitment to values that are inclusive of all humanity, with a discourse that respects diversity, has a profound contribution to make - not only to its own citizens in Europe but to the global community. It can give a lead in creating a form of ethical globalization that recognizes intergenerational responsibilities.

- Such an integrated discourse as might allow for this to happen is, I believe, missing just now. The prevailing narrative seems to be trapped intellectually in a structure of thought which it appears unable to challenge, from which it seems unable, or at times even unwilling, to escape or exit.
In the absence of considering other possible models or approaches, we are in danger of drifting into, and sustaining, a kind of moral and intellectual impotence. Yet we have available to us, I repeat again, a rich legacy of intellectual, radical work upon which we can draw.

There are, in our shared intellectual heritage, upon which we could draw, let us remember that in the energetic pursuit of new thought that characterised the European Enlightenment, itself formed from the thought of other ancient Enlightenments, some powerful examples of dissident and radical thought. Let us never forget the singular example given by those dissident thinkers, Diderot, Kant and Herder. They in their times identified the flaw in the Enlightenment thinking that supported empire, with its insatiable drive, and courageously challenged it through their books, pamphlets and public expressions.

The logistical strand of economics which today holds sway and stands as a hegemonic model of economic theory, not only in Europe, is the flaw of our times. This strand of neoclassical economics is of course useful for limited and defined tasks. It is insufficient however as an approach for our problems and our future. We need new substantive pluralist political economic models and an emancipatory discourse to deliver them, and I suggest that this is possible.
Because the dominating model and its method defines not only discourse but policy options there is an urgent need for new models of connection between economy, society and policy. These are essential for genuine, pluralist choices in policy, not to speak of democratic accountability and relevance, if we are to address the current challenges. As European Parliamentarians, I encourage you to let these new models into the European discourse, give them space in the committee structure of the Parliament and the institutional structure of the Union.

But to achieve that discourse the role of public intellectuals is also an urgent one. They are called upon, I suggest, to state publicly and unequivocally that the problems of Europe are not simply technical, and certainly not solely amenable to solution by technocratic measures at the expense of democratic accountability. The suggestion that citizens and their representatives are not fiscally or economically literate enough to carry the decision making necessary for policies that impinge on their lives - be it unemployment, housing, health, education or the environment - has the most serious implications in legitimacy terms. It is an assumption that challenges democracy itself.
- A disembodied version of the economic space if used as a substitute for peoples, societies, or states, loses its connection with history, contemporary challenges and would lack the moral connection with the ethics and solidarity we now need. It would evade rather than face our present challenges.

- A European Union – if it is to be respected as the great project it is and can be - must draw on the intellectual heritage and the intellectual imaginings, and the existing talents and capacity of the peoples of Europe. It is a fully authentic Union if it is characterised by solidarity.

- Mar focal scoir [to conclude]

- If our European Union and its prospects are not of this authentic character just now, it must be made so by changes in consciousness and commitment, and through reasserting the idealism, intellectual strength and moral courage that drove the founding fathers of the Union. European Member States are peoples, with history, with current needs, with possibilities to be shared.

- If we were, as an alternative, to regard our people merely as dependent variables to the opinions of rating agencies, agencies unaccountable to any demos, and indeed found to be fallible on occasion, then instead of being citizens we would be reduced to the status of mere consumers; pawns in a speculative chess
board of fiscal moves in a game derived from assumptions that are weak, untestable or more frequently undeclared.

- To ask that our decisions be normative rather than narrowly, fiscally technocratic is, I suggest, more than an integration of our intellectual capacities. It is to defend and deepen democracy. I readily acknowledge the utility in so many areas of logistical economics. However, I believe that if its methods are elevated to being a substitute for the integrated multi-disciplinary scholarship that is now needed to address the varying contexts and contingencies of current challenges, such a sole reliance on a technocratic approach would be markedly insufficient.

- If we are to deliver the European Union of peace and prosperity that the founders envisaged, and that I believe the citizens of Europe yearn for beyond the understandable fear of present circumstances, a strategy that draws on the research, scholarship and world views of all of the social sciences, and ethics and philosophy is required.

- President, Members of Parliament, Ministers, Commissioners, leaders of groups,

- From the flux of diverse histories, from our current problems, from our fears and our aspirations I hope will emerge a response that constitutes a tapestry of many colours, of
different strengths in its threads; and, in its design, evocative of what memory has made endure, and the human spirit has invested with hope. Whether it is made out of wondrous reason or woven with a prayer will not matter. What matters is that it be work of us all, working together, in co-operation, cosmopolitan and open to the world, caring for it, in an inter-generationally responsible way, and embracing all our people as equal citizens.

So let us the citizens of the European Union who want to make a real Union together, move out of the dark into the light and achieve something indeed worthy of Friedrich Schiller’s poem originally called "Ode to Freedom".

Go raibh maith agat