It is an honour and a pleasure for me to be here this evening as we celebrate with European Movement Ireland forty years of Ireland’s membership of the European Union.

Looking around this evening I see many of the men and women who have shaped Ireland’s relationship with the EU, and who have helped to shape the EU itself.

EM Ireland can be proud of its contribution to the relationship between Ireland and the EU. For nearly sixty years, European Movement Ireland has made the case for Europe and today continues its work of providing information, raising awareness and stimulating public debate about the European Union.
Its founders – people like Declan Costello, Garret FitzGerald and Denis Corboy - were true pioneers of Ireland’s future in Europe. Many other distinguished figures have taken the vision forward since then.

This mission has never been more urgent.

The profound economic crisis we face has caused many to pause and think more deeply about their attitude towards the EU.

It is now clear that the EU was not adequately equipped to respond effectively to the crisis at its outset. Crisis meetings of EU leaders became the norm and our citizens asked why Europe did not have at its disposal the instruments necessary to calm the market storm.

That moment has now passed as the EU has strengthened its capacity to withstand financial shocks.
Europe is better able to respond to crisis but we are still left with its effects.

There are far too many people unemployed across Europe, particularly amongst our youth.

We must now chart a path to recovery which our citizens can have faith in, one which offers them employment, opportunity and hope.

We must justify this faith through determined action to deliver on this promise.

And we must ourselves remember what Europe can achieve and what Ireland can achieve within Europe.

As we mark four decades of membership, it is a good time to reflect on how the European Union has helped to transform Ireland.

I know this audience understands how hugely positive our experience has been.
The transformation of our economy is the most visible evidence of this. Irish GDP has increased by 500% while our population has grown by 50%. So even now, after the profound economic crisis we have suffered, we are far better off than we were in 1973. Our infrastructure reflects our new economic status, transformed through effective use of EU structural funds.

Ireland’s economy today is modern, diverse and technologically advanced. Our agriculture sector has been modernised through the Common Agricultural Policy which continues to sustain rural communities throughout Ireland.

We have widened our horizons, and emerged as an open, international trading nation. Irish trade has increased 90 fold in the past 40 years.

The fundamentals of Ireland’s economic relationships have been transformed by membership of the Single Market, with access to a market of 500 million people. Our membership of the Single Market
has helped us attract inward investment. Over 1000 overseas companies are in Ireland today – including of course KBC Bank, which has over 700 employees in this country.

For all our current battle with unemployment, the size of Ireland’s labour force has almost doubled in 40 years. This is in large part because of greater participation by women, who now make up 56% of those in work.

Today’s Irish workforce is young and skilled. In 2011, 46.3% of the Irish population aged between 25 and 34 had third level education – the highest rate anywhere in the EU.

Of course, youth unemployment is one of the most disastrous consequences of the economic crisis, and it has hit us hard. The Irish Presidency has made tackling it a top priority – the agreement reached here in Dublin on a Youth Guarantee Scheme will I believe stand as a lasting legacy of our Presidency.
As stability and growth return to Europe, these young people will help to lift us out of the economic crisis.

Ireland has always been a strong advocate for a true Single Market and now, as Presidency, we are placing particular emphasis on the Digital Single Market. It is areas like this that our youth, with such creative potential, can contribute so much.

Ireland, of course, is more than an economy and from its foundation the European Union was more than a Common Market or an Economic Community. It is a Union based on common values and shared ideals, a Union that has brought peace to Europe for over fifty years.

It has helped to modernise Irish society, ensuring greater equality and fairness in the workplace. It provided a new and more constructive context for our relations with our closest neighbour and helped to transform relations within these islands.
I could say much more about what the EU has done for Ireland. But what about Ireland’s contribution to the EU?

Ireland may be a small member state, but we have helped to shape the EU as it has developed over the last 40 years, particularly during our six previous Presidencies.

The inaugural meeting of the European Council was held in Dublin in 1975 during our first Presidency.

In 1990 Dublin Castle was the venue for the historic meetings of European leaders that led to the reunification of Germany.

Our last Presidency in 2004 saw the accession of ten new member states, ending finally the divisions of post-War Europe.

In 2013 we are, as Presidency, working to restore economic stability in Europe and creating the conditions for renewed growth and job creation.
Day by day we are registering new successes which can make a real difference for the lives of our citizens.

Last June, EU leaders committed to breaking the vicious link between banks and sovereigns. Through our work on Banking Union, we have already made very credible steps towards delivery of the commitments we made last June.

As Presidency, we were pleased to be able to secure agreement on the Single Supervisory Mechanism, which will now enter into force next year. We were also able to conclude work on the Credit Requirements Directive, which will ensure that Europe’s banks are better positioned to withstand future economic shocks.

But a key remaining step for our term is agreement on the Banking Recovery and Resolution Directive, which I fully believe remains within our grasp. We also want to keep to the June deadline for agreement on the Deposit Guarantee Directive, which was reiterated by the European Council in March.
We have had breakthroughs too in the area of the Single Market with agreement this week to modernise the EU system of state aids and the Union Customs Code. This builds on other successes which will help our businesses thrive, including a new patent system, accounting reform and dispute resolution mechanisms. All of these achievements make the EU a better and easier place in which to do business. We are making doing all we can to make a difference.

Just last night the Irish Presidency delivered a historic breakthrough on the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy which will see the elimination of discards. We have also seen major progress with unprecedented engagement with the European Parliament on CAP reform. We hope to deliver on this before we hand over the baton to our Lithuanian colleagues.

We continue to make a contribution to the Union, its institutions and its future. This week we have injected new momentum into the negotiations with the European Parliament on a new budget for the
Union – the Multi-Annual Financial Framework. €960 billion which will help our economy grow.

As Presidency we are working to secure a negotiation mandate for a trade agreement between the EU and the US, a historic Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. The potential benefit to the EU of such a deal has been estimated at €220 billion annually. We can look back with pride on our previous Irish Presidencies. I am confident that we will have good cause to look back at this Presidency with similar pride.

I am also proud of the many Irish men and women who have devoted their careers to Europe. Our Commissioners have made their mark, from Ray MacSharry’s reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy, to Peter Sutherland’s initiation of the hugely successful Erasmus programme, to Máire Geoghegan-Quinn’s work over recent years to restore Europe’s global competitiveness through research and innovation.
We have had an Irish President of the European Parliament in Pat Cox. Three of the 19 MEPs to be given awards in 2012 for outstanding work were Irish. Two of the five Secretaries-General of the European Commission, David O'Sullivan and Catherine Day, have been Irish. These are no coincidences. They reflect the outstanding quality of the contribution of Irish men and women to the work of the European institutions.

Our people have been at the heart of Europe, helping to shape the agenda and driving reform.

And I like to think that their intelligent, principled, purposeful, and pragmatic approach has been mirrored in the Irish Government’s approach to our engagement with Europe.

But as the European Union has moved forward in response to new challenges, it sometimes leaves its citizens behind. We haven’t always explained well what we are doing, and why.
The current economic crisis has knocked our citizens’ confidence in the EU, in large and small member states, debtor countries and creditor countries alike.

And our response to the crisis has raised concerns about the centralisation of economic and budgetary decision-making.

In this the European Year of Citizens we must address citizens’ concerns as a top priority.

We must find ways to communicate more effectively with our people about the EU. We need to explain that the EU is not something separate, far-removed from the daily preoccupations of Irish people. Rather the decisions we make at home, and those we make in the EU, are tightly interwoven.

This brings me back to the vital role played by the European Movement in providing accessible information and fostering an informed and constructive debate. As part of the launch of the European Year of Citizens, EM Ireland organised a very successful
Citizens’ Dialogue here in Dublin, which I opened with the Tánaiste and President Barroso. They have followed up with regional debates in Cork, Galway and Limerick.

I would also like to congratulate European Movement on their imaginative Youth Media and the Irish Presidency programme which has supported a team of 25 young citizen journalists from around the country to cover the Irish Presidency, through articles, videos, podcasts and more. I met the YMIP team at a recent training session, and for a fresh take on our work as Presidency, I highly recommend a visit to their blog.

Another new undertaking that I really like is the Blue Star programme. This is an education initiative for primary school students to learn about the EU, and how it affects the lives of Irish people. Blue Star has proved popular and very successful, getting a new young Irish generation thinking about Europe.

The Government is also determined to encourage more Irish people to apply for and win jobs and internships within the EU’s institutions.
We work closely on this with the European Movement, who through their Grad Jobs in Europe scheme provide information, support and advice to potential candidates.

I would like to thank KBC Bank and European Movement Ireland for the excellent initiative which we are marking tonight: the “Ireland and the EU: Forty Years of Change” essay competition for third-level students. My congratulations to the winners, who will be announced later.

The last 40 years have seen great changes in Ireland. The course of Ireland’s recent history is inextricably bound up with that of the Union. Our future will be too. And there can be no doubt that the next 40 years will see further great changes – in Ireland, and in the EU.

Ireland will live up to its responsibility to shape the Union of the future. I know the European Movement will stand beside us. It will offer advice, informed comment and constructive challenge. And as we work to bring the EU closer to its citizens, we know that the
European Movement will continue to build the connection between Ireland’s people and Europe.

ENDS.