

Speech by Lord Puttnam of Queensgate, CBE

t the

Digital Agenda Assembly

As delivered

**To be delivered at:
The Printworks Room,
Dublin Castle
20 June 2013**

It's a pleasure as well as a privilege to have been invited to speak to you this morning.

I'm very proud to be the Digital Champion for Ireland, and I'm proud that the Irish Presidency has done such a superb job in hosting this week of meetings around the 'Digital Agenda'.

I'm proud also that Ireland, very early on, became a hub for international ICT companies - both in software and online content services.

With the wealth of talent on this island, there is a real opportunity for serious 'digital entrepreneurship'.

It's my belief that Ireland has a huge contribution to make to the EU's Digital Agenda over the next decade - and well beyond.

But when it comes to consideration of the future, if twenty years in politics has taught me any one thing it's that the stultifying grip of the 'status quo' - driven

primarily by fear - is something you have to kick hard against if you're to achieve real and lasting change.

And that's troubling, because the 'digital world' is shifting on its axis – and this is happening significantly faster than most people seem prepared to acknowledge.

And the changes necessitated by this 'digital world' are not something we can start adjusting to, or considering, tomorrow or next week; they are already upon us - they are very much of the 'here and now'.

And yet, I regret to report, that right across the EU we don't appear to have developed anything like the sense of urgency we're going to need if we're to grasp the quite extraordinary opportunities offered by the digital era.

This is particularly regrettable at a time when unemployment across the EU continues to grow - most especially among the young.

Too often, we seem demoralised, and even blinded by the scale of the challenge; so much so that we're in danger of losing sight of the really immense possibilities that come with it.

I'm sorry to say that we continue to seem embarrassingly wedded to many of the practices of yesteryear – to an 'analogue era' which emphatically is now a thing of the past.

But here I must pay tribute to our 'Digital Commissioner' for her extraordinary determination, in the face of a fair degree of apathy and confused priorities, to drive through the necessary changes.

Her pioneering work, ably supported by her colleagues, is something that genuinely allows me hope for the future, and helps reinforce the value of the Union at a time when some have questioned that future; not least, I'm sad to say, on the other side of the Irish Sea - and here I'm referring to parts of the English media, not the whole of the UK!

And speaking of England, and with an eye on this seeming reluctance to embrace change; I'm going to try to illustrate what can happen when a nation, or even a group of nations, continues to think of itself as successful, when in reality it is merely resting all-too-complacently on its laurels.

Since 1872, for over 70 years, the England soccer team had only ever lost on home soil to a foreign team once - this happened to be to the Republic of Ireland, in 1949! The English sincerely believed themselves to be invincible, most particularly when playing at Wembley.

On the 22nd of November 1953 they met a Hungarian team – at home - at ‘Fortress Wembley’!

Here is what happened – the Hungarians are in the dark shirts:

(Play clip of England versus Hungary)

That defeat forced a fundamental reassessment of a hopelessly outmoded approach to training and tactics in English football.

As Billy Wright, the England captain later said:

"We completely underestimated the advances that Hungary had made, and not only tactically.

When we walked out at Wembley that afternoon, side by side with the visiting team, I looked down and noticed that the Hungarians were wearing strange ‘lightweight’ boots, cut away like slippers under the ankle bone.

I turned to the rest of the team and said, we should be alright here lads, they haven't even got proper kit!"

I guess that's the equivalent of thinking that today's 'proper kit' is a PC, or possibly a laptop - when our international rivals are principally focused on tablets and mobiles. And that makes sense when you consider that, last year, just 350 million PCs were sold - against 1.6 billion mobile devices.

In fact 21% of the world's population, now have - not just a 'mobile' phone - but a 'smart-phone'.

We're not going to gain the faith of a generation of young Europeans if they believe we're somehow clinging to a different planet – worse, they could easily come to think of us as 'analogue dinosaurs'.

Here's an amusing American illustration of the generational gulf that can result when this happens:

[Show clip of: 'Ferris Bueller's Day Off']

Who in this audience - watching the clip - didn't recall a youthful a experience that came uncomfortably close to that?

To all too many young Young Europeans in Secondary Schools this is still a daily experience - it needn't be like that.

Today's average 19 year old was just 11 when 'YouTube' was launched – for them it is not a new platform, it's as much part of the furniture of their lives as television was when most of us were growing up.

It is they, not us, who are responsible for the vast majority of the 100 hours of video uploaded onto YouTube – every minute!

Try as we might to shrug it off; the implications of all of this are enormous.

I would suggest that most, if not all the assumptions of 'globalization' that drove the enlargement decisions of 1993, have been dramatically altered by subsequent events.

The rise of the Asian nations, in particular China; the revival of another slumbering giant, South America, these things could not possibly have been anticipated in terms of their global impact.

Similarly anyone who thinks that Africa doesn't have the potential to leapfrog us in its use of technology is, in my view, indulging in the same type of benign complacency as afflicted that English soccer team!

In truth Africa may have little choice - last week the UN released figures which show the population of that continent, if present trends continue, rising from 1.1 billion to 4.2 billion by the end of the century - with Nigeria's projected population exceeding that of the United States by 2050!

Surely, the only 'sustainable' answer to Africa's future in addressing these challenges, lies in the creative use of technology; and of course they're not encumbered by 'legacy technologies' – demonstrated by the astonishing growth in mobile banking.

Recalling that lesson from Wembley in 1953, it would take a brave person to bet against an African team winning the World Cup in the next twenty years!

The immense danger for Europe, should we fail to adapt to the realities of the Digital World – the here and now – ought to be crystal clear.

We could all-too-easily end up struggling as valiantly, and as hopelessly against technological change as did 'Monsieur Hulot', in those wonderful films of my youth by Jacques Tati.

In the end, our ability to rise to these challenges will depend on our success - across the whole of Europe - in delivering the best possible level of 'transferable skills' to a generation of young people – a generation who are likely to have three, four or maybe even five different careers during their working lives.

What they are relying upon is the opportunity to succeed - and that will require belief in a political leadership that fully understands the nature of both their challenges and their opportunities.

Fifty years ago last week that great Irish American, President John F Kennedy, made two epoch making speeches; the first on disarmament, and the second on civil rights.

The first led almost immediately to the nuclear test ban treaty, and the second to the 1964 Civil Rights Act - both represented giant leaps forward.

Democratic politics, well led and well informed, can achieve great things.

But there is a precondition - we have to trust that those making these decisions on our behalf have a shared vision, and are constantly acting in the best interests of the whole of the people.

Each member of this new 'digital generation' has their own dream – what we owe them, is the opportunity to fulfil it.

That's why it's particularly important that if audiovisual services enter the negotiations for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership at some future point – after their temporary exclusion last week – the Commission sticks to its stated redlines, and ensures that the EU and its Member States retain the ability to adapt legislation to whatever digital environment finally emerges.

Across Europe, both the dreams and the people can come in a variety of shapes and sizes so, as I move towards my conclusion allow me, as a former filmmaker, to illustrate that important thought in a way that might at least make you smile!

[Show the clip of 'The Bear']

“Porquoi pas moi” - “Why not me” is, in effect, the question all our young people are asking us – and we need to start providing clear and entirely credible answers.

So my immediate challenge to everyone in this room is this:

It can no longer be a question of what you believe you can achieve in the next one, two, five let alone ten years.

It's a question of which tasks you will focus on when you walk back into your office on Monday morning, and which of those tasks can be completed before you set-off for a well deserved summer break, just a few weeks from now?

In their different ways, many people here this morning have the power, the immense power, to improve the lives of Europe's citizens.

But as increasing numbers of young people are beginning to remind us:

“It's not what you do – it's what you do with what you do that really matters.”

So I have to end by asking – what are we going to do, with what we can do?

Thank you very much for listening to me.