Minister of State for European Affairs Lucinda Creighton TD
Address to the Leuven Institute for Ireland in Europe

“Europe in a New Axial Age? Democracy and Citizenship in a Deeper Union”

Leuven, Belgium
21 March 2013

Ladies and gentlemen,

Many thanks for taking the time to come here to the magnificent surroundings of the Leuven Institute for Ireland in Europe this evening.

The Institute is a symbol of the Irish mentality. It is a symbol of warmth, openness, culture and a desire to connect to others, particularly our European neighbours.

Your goal of maximising the benefits of EU membership for the island of Ireland is a mission I wholeheartedly support.

With special thanks also to Caroline, Ronan and all the staff at the Institute for inviting me to speak a little about democratic accountability, citizenship and European integration at this, one of the most critical junctures of the European project and mid-way through our Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

It is said that in antiquity there was a period between the great ages of societal development which saw the emergence of a common set of values and goals amongst all peoples - a so-called axial age.

When we talk about an such age, we talk about an interregnum between ages which gives us a pause for breath and space for a renewal of values.

As we emerge from the difficulties of the last decade, slowly, bruised, more wary but also wiser, more in control and with a greater appreciation of what is important to us in our society, we find ourselves in that interregnum.

The economic crisis brought with it a necessary re-design of our national and European economic architectures to restore stability and growth. This has been the driving force behind the efforts of the Irish Government and all Members States of the Union. However, the crisis also affords us an opportunity to re-enforce those foundations on which the European Union was built.
The EU was not created to fuel the excesses of neo-liberal free marketers. Improving the European post-war economy was the catalyst for change - for bringing the nations of Europe together and for solidifying peace.

Pure economic growth was not the exclusive end goal then. Nor should it be now.

If our actions are not guided by the sole objective of improving the lives of our citizens, then we have failed in protecting our inheritance and the inheritance of the generations to follow.

In the midst of all our actions to regain our competitiveness, to return our economies to growth and to create employment, we are also afforded the chance to reflect on what has gone before and the kind of society we now wish to create.

This is an opportunity that doesn't come around often.

Thirteen years ago, at the very height of the European economic success story, Joschka Fischer delivered a speech on the future of the European Union. He voiced concerns which have echoed down to to-day:

“Half a century on, the process of European integration is probably the biggest political challenge facing the states and peoples involved, because its success or failure, indeed even just the stagnation of this process of integration, will be of crucial importance to the future of each and every one of us, but especially to the future of the young Generation.”

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ensuring democratic accountability and legitimacy as we progress towards ever deeper integration is the biggest challenge facing the future of the Union.

The Treaty of Lisbon was the first significant step to strengthening the role of citizens and breathing new democratic life into the Union. With the enhanced powers of the European Parliament and with greater involvement of national parliaments in EU Affairs, the voice of the citizen can now be heard with far greater force than was the case in years before.

However, when people have compared the Union to the workings of their own national systems of governance, they cannot help but perceive shortcomings.

This is changing.
In his report of last year, ‘Towards a Genuine Economic and Monetary Union’, the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, acknowledged that without integration and legitimacy progressing in parallel, there is no possibility of a Union of economic and monetary affairs.

The European Council, in its Conclusions of October last year, also committed to ensuring strong mechanisms for democratic accountability.

Addressing a legitimacy deficit in the affairs of the EU and enhancing the role of the citizen overarch all our efforts in achieving stability, sustainable growth and prosperity.

As Presidency of the Council of the European Union, we have made this issue a priority. We have focussed our Presidency on stability, jobs and growth. It’s about creating the stability needed to foster growth. It’s about growth providing employment and contributing to the welfare of our citizens.

Stability - in our economic and political worlds - is the keystone on which everything else is built and stability means ensuring that European citizens have a demonstrable say in decisions that affect their lives.

Stability means that Governments, politicians, decision-makers and the European Institutions are not just accountable in theory, but accountable in practice, through the vehicles of democracy of the European Parliament and national parliaments.

This issue was the core theme for discussion at an Informal meeting of EU Affairs Ministers which I hosted in Dublin in January. There was unanimous support for greater efforts to strengthen the link between citizens and decisions taken at European level.

While recent polls indicate support for the EU at approx. 40%, over 55% of the European electorate feels that their voice does not count. It is hard to conjure legitimacy from such numbers.

Up to now, there have been few real attempts to reach out and to increase the opportunities for citizens to participate in the EU policy process. There is a clear need for the system of governance to empower citizens, but also for citizens to empower themselves.

Democracy and citizenship go hand-in-hand. Integration and legitimacy is a symbiotic relationship in which they not only validate each other but are interdependent. For real and meaningful accountability, we need both the political system and citizens to engage in the process.
Ladies and gentlemen,

As many of you will know, 2013 has been designated as the European Year of Citizens.

During this year I want to encourage greater discussion among individuals, communities and civil society about their vision for the future of Europe. Now is the time to think seriously about ways to increase democratic legitimacy and accountability and to ensure that these are firmly embedded in a deeper, more integrated Europe.

This year is our chance to have a pan-European debate on what it means to be a citizen of this European Union and the kind of future we want to realise within it.

At the beginning of the Irish Presidency, I launched the first Citizens’ Dialogue, alongside Vice-President of the European Commission Viviane Reding, in Dublin.

Over 200 citizens availed of this Dialogue to discuss their hopes, aspirations and concerns for the EU with us and it provided us with a vital opportunity to try to address these issues and point to the progress that is being made in bring the EU closer to the citizen, and the citizen closer to the EU.

I really believe that these Dialogues are part of an essential discourse between politicians and citizens which needs to clearly convey the fact that the future of the EU is not something to be decided in the corridors of power in Brussels or our capitals.

During the Presidency, I want to encourage greater discussion among individuals, communities and civil society about their vision for the future of Europe. To this end, we are organising a number of regional dialogues which will take place around the country over the course of 2013.

As the Union pursues deeper integration, we need to ensure that we move no closer to the point whereby Atlas will shrug and the legitimacy of the EU will fall, unsupported as it is by democracy and active citizenship.

Attempts to address the legitimacy deficit have not been successful because Governments have been ambiguous about what type of Europe they are seeking and people are not clear as to what they want in terms of EU democracy - more or less Europe; a federal state; a European version of the UN; a market Europe or a social democratic Europe.

Nobody, politician or citizen, can absolve themselves from the duty to engage in this debate. Nobody wishes to live in a Hobbesian Europe where every person, every State, is out for themselves - that is not a future I wish to have.

Engaging in the process, engaging in the debate is an issue of collective responsibility and collective action. Being a European carries both rights and obligations and, as in the legal world, ignorantia juris non excusat.
We must not lose sight of what makes us European - principles of democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and social justice. We consider these to the European values against which aspiring EU candidates are to be judged. We should hold ourselves against the same criteria.

Europe is indeed in a new axial age and out of which will emerge the values and goals of a new Union. It is the duality of decision-makers and Institutions and the citizens of Europe engaging together, in a meaningful debate, the outcomes of which will be acted upon, which will ensure democratic accountability and legitimacy and which will ultimately determine the type of Union we emerge into.

This will be our Europe - we need to ensure that we are a part of it.

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