



Uachtaránacht na hÉireann ar
Chomhairle an Aontais Eorpaigh
Irish Presidency of the Council
of the European Union

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**Address by Brendan Howlin TD,
Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform to the
European Parliament Regional Development Committee
23 January 2013**

Madam Chair
Honourable Members
Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to meet you today and I look forward to an exchange of views on an area of public policy that, I am sure you will agree, lies at the heart of Europe's return to growth.

Over the last number of months, in preparation for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of Ministers, I have had the opportunity to meet you, Madam Chair, and also a number of the rapporteurs responsible for the Cohesion legislative package.

I have found these discussions to be very useful and informative and I am taking the opportunity of my visit to Brussels this week to continue that process, which I feel has been very worthwhile in advancing a shared understanding of the work in hand for Ireland's Presidency. I am looking forward to close co-operation between the Irish Presidency of the Council and you as members of the REGI Committee over the next six months.

2013 marks the fortieth anniversary of Ireland's accession to the European Union, or the European Economic Community as it was then. Membership of the European Union has played an immense role in Ireland's social, economic and political development in the intervening four decades. More recently, the European Union has been a key partner in Ireland's programme of recovery.

We have faced a difficult challenge in repairing the economy and the public finances. But we are committed to meeting that challenge, and I am confident that we can lead Ireland back to normal market funding and to sustainable growth in living standards and employment. The Irish Government strongly believes that membership of the European Union is vital to this ongoing recovery and to our future. We remain deeply committed to the values the Union stands for and the community approach in taking forward the Union's work.

Much has changed in the European Union since Ireland joined in 1973. Not only has it grown from 9 Member States to 27, soon to be 28, but the nature of the Union has broadened and deepened. One of the principal developments has been the strongly enhanced role of the European Parliament.

This enhanced role for the European Parliament is something I very much welcome. I appear before you today as a committed parliamentarian myself with many years experience. Next month I will have been a member of the Irish Parliament, Oireachtas na hEireann, for thirty years. I have served in both the lower and upper houses, including as Deputy Chair, or Leas Cheann Comhairle, of the lower house, the Dáil.

This is experience I have brought to bear in my current role as Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform.

As part of my reform role I have been keen to modernize the working of our national Parliament, particularly in the area of parliamentary inquiry. Following the crisis there is, quite properly, major public concern that these systems of governance must be reformed. In the same spirit, I value the changes which have given a new and stronger role to the European Parliament. A Parliament fully involved in setting the legislative framework for a wide range of key policy areas such as Cohesion must help bring Europe closer to its citizens, something that is important to acknowledge in 2013, the Year of the Citizen.

I was especially pleased that, in the run-up to the Irish Presidency of the Council, the Irish Parliament had an opportunity to hear from the President of the European Parliament, President Schulz and that the Government was able to meet the Conference of Presidents of the Parliament. I think these engagements

set a very positive tone for engagement between the two sides. I can assure you that my officials and I will continue with that constructive engagement over the coming months.

2013 also marks the seventh time Ireland has assumed the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. This is an opportunity the Irish Government and people have always valued. The Presidency proves that this is indeed a union, a structure designed to accommodate both larger and smaller countries. By showing that a small country like Ireland can play a role at its heart, the process of widening and deepening the union can be progressed.

While we have had success in the past, we are conscious that success does not come by chance, but is the product of hard work and commitment.

This Presidency will give Ireland an opportunity to demonstrate that we are a constructive and committed Member State that belongs at the very heart of the European decision-making process. We see ourselves as country in recovery helping to drive recovery in Europe. We believe that we can help address the problems that the Union faces, and we look forward to working closely with our partners to ensure that the Union emerges from the crisis stronger. But we do not underestimate what is involved.

We want our Presidency to be viewed as fair, honest and businesslike, with a clear and definite focus on results.

We will work closely and co-operatively with all our partners and the EU institutions to move the EU agenda forward constructively through consensus. This approach has served Ireland and the EU well in the past, and we will seek to replicate it in 2013.

In our dealings with the European Parliament, the Irish Presidency will seek to represent the agreed position of the Council in a fair and impartial manner. At the same time, Ireland recognises and respects the prerogatives of the Parliament as co-legislators. I am fully aware that it is only through close and constructive co-operation with the Parliament that we can hope to achieve the ambitions we have set ourselves.

We take over the Presidency of the Council at a time of great challenge for Ireland and the EU. The EU has a vital role to play in the process of economic recovery across Member States.

The main strategic priority for our Presidency will be to stress the need to get the EU economy growing again, through boosting competitiveness and creating jobs. The theme of our Presidency programme is stability, jobs and growth.

The Presidency programme sets out the tangible decisions we will push for so as to achieve our strategic priorities for the Presidency as Ireland chairs negotiations across nine different Council formations from January until June and engages in discussions with the Parliament across a wide range of issues.

The programme is based on three core principles: a people-centred recovery designed to last; investment in job-friendly growth and in Europe's resources; and engagement with our partners across Europe and the wider world.

Cohesion spending lies at the very heart of the growth agenda and will be one of the primary instruments available to the Union to drive investment and to promote growth and jobs in the years ahead, as we strive towards meeting the Europe 2020 goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

Forty years experience has taught us that Cohesion policy has been one of the success stories of Europe. It lies at the very heart of European integration and solidarity and proves that these words have real meaning for every part of the Union.

It has played a major role in reducing social and economic disparities and increasing cohesion in a Union of 500 million people in 27 Member States across 271 regions. The financial investments from the EU Budget are important levers available to Member States to bring about change and encourage development in the Regions.

The Irish experience of Cohesion funding has been very positive, with Cohesion policy playing an important role in the development of Ireland's economy.

Everywhere you travel in Ireland you can see the distinctive Structural Funds badge on plaques and signs, which highlights the many ways we have benefitted from Cohesion funding – from major infrastructure road and rail projects to smaller community projects, to projects aimed at helping people get jobs, acquire new skills and find better jobs. All serve to underline the real and tangible ways Ireland has benefitted from its membership of the European Union.

A unique example of the benefits of Cohesion funding is the PEACE programme. The EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland, to give it its full title, is a distinctive programme part-funded by the European Regional Development Fund.

The aim of the PEACE Programme is to reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society and to promote reconciliation by assisting activities which help to reconcile communities and contribute towards a shared society for everyone. The European Union has always been a strong supporter of the peace process, not just in Northern Ireland but across Europe, as witnessed by last year's award of the Nobel Peace Prize.

The new Cohesion policy regulations are closely linked to the MFF negotiations. The absence of agreement on the MFF at the November European Council will obviously have implications for the timetable for concluding work on the legislative package. The Presidency will, of course, fully respect the ordinary legislative procedure.

My ambition is that, as co-legislators, we should reach agreement on the full package during the lifetime of the Irish Presidency. I believe this Committee shares that ambition. The value of this objective is, to me, clear: we as legislators need to give those who are actually involved in preparing programmes the necessary legal certainty so that the new round of programmes can commence as early as possible in 2014.

As you will be aware, the Council reached partial general approaches on a number of important thematic blocks in April, June, October and November 2012. The elements that are still open within the Council, including Final Provisions, Recitals and the European Grouping of Territorial Co-operation amending regulation, are

being discussed at present and I hope we will be able to reach agreement in the Council in February.

I would like to pay tribute to the Cypriot and Danish Presidencies both for their efforts and the substantial achievements they made in dealing with this complex legislative package. I must also recall the significant contribution of the Polish Presidency in framing the policy issues at the start of the process in 2011.

It is also appropriate to acknowledge the progress made on the legislative package in the Parliament where I think the REGI Committee has shown the way in relation to the range of legislative files that are dependent on the MFF. In addition, a significant amount of progress has been made in the trilogues which commenced last September, most notably the compromise reached before Christmas on the strategic programming elements of the Common Provisions and European Social Fund regulations.

I think, therefore, that we start 2013 in a good place. However, I would not at all underestimate the enormity of the task facing us if we are to reach agreement on the legislative package so that partnership agreements and operational programmes can be in place across 27 Member States – 28 once Croatia joins the Union – by 2014.

Everyone here is involved in Cohesion policy across Europe so we all understand how important that is. We have a shared responsibility and a shared ambition to reach agreement as soon as possible. We in the Council appreciate the constructive engagement by the Parliament that led to the compromise on the strategic programming block. Both legislators need to continue with this constructive approach given the need to maintain progress.

On behalf of the Presidency, I am committed to working in co-operation with the Parliament, as co-legislator, to achieve this end. My officials are already involved in trilogues with the Committee and these are progressing well, building on the substantial progress made during the Cyprus Presidency. As in all negotiations there are differences between the parties, but we must overcome these if we are to reach agreement by the summer. The Presidency is available at all times.

In conclusion, Madam Chair, I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to speak to the Committee. There is a saying in Irish - chionn beirt rud nach bhfeiceann duine amháin – two people can see things that one cannot. In that spirit, I look forward to a constructive exchange of views.

Go raibh maith agaibh – thank you.