

# **The Conference of the Speakers of the EU Parliaments Bratislava, 26 May 2007**

## **RAISING NATIONAL EUROPEAN AWARENESS**

**Speech by Mr. Rory O'Hanlon,  
Speaker of the Irish House of Representatives  
(Transcript)**

Mr. President, Speakers of Parliaments, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

In the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary years fitting that we are and meeting in Bratislava fair in the hear of Europe to discuss raising awareness of the activities of the European Union, a project that has counter reflected in a joint commitment to shared vision, close cooperation and joint responsibility; the symbol of freedom, democracy and prosperity.

The European project today faces many challenges both within and beyond its borders. To help overcome these, the European Union must be brought closer to the citizens. Citizens do not always see a connection between issues that important to them in their daily lives and the activities of the European Union or indeed of the really great role of the national parliament. Without the confidence of its citizens, the European Union will not achieve its goals. However, the European institutions cannot by themselves achieve these objectives. The involvement of national parliaments has been recognised as an indispensable requirement to achieve this reality. National parliaments are the bridge between European institutions and European citizens. Members of the national parliaments are in a pivotal position to reveal the hopes, fears, and desires of their constituents to the European Union and to bring European issues into mainstream of the national political life. By facilitation the import of citizens to the European Union policy process, national parliaments can also contribute to a more democratic and transparent approach to the development of EU policy.

I would like to present very briefly how we celebrated in our own parliament, Europe Day. As a special fall setting of parliament last year, Europe was celebrated by members of both Houses of Parliament. For the first time a European Commissioner, Mariann Fischer Boel, responsible for Agriculture and Rural Development addressed members of both Houses of Parliament and took questions from the floor. Before, a dedicated website was set up for to the invited members of the public to contribute comments and questions for the discussions during the debates. Many of the contributions received were raised during the course of the debates. Following the success of this event in 2006, it was agreed that the exercise should be repeated and expanded upon in 2007, and arrangements are now in place for that.

This parliamentary event has, in my view, allowed citizens and larger sections of the media to become familiar with policies and decision-making at the European level. It also has provided a greater opportunity for members of parliament to engage in ongoing debates on European issues in plenary session of the parliament. The perceived lack of democratic accountability of the European Union institutions, and the lack of information on the activities of the European Union was identified as a matter of concern in the aftermath of the first Nice referendum in Ireland. It was against that background that a national Forum on Europe was established within s a college for public debate on European Union issues. Membership of the forum is drawn from all political parties and groups represented in the Houses of the Oireachtas, and it also includes civil society groups, academic institutions and NGOs. The success of the forum lies in its capacity to engage with all groups of our society and stimulate debate on a broad range of issues, including in a higher level of knowledge of the European Union. The Forum also offers the possibility for policy-makers to consult their citizens directly.

The Conference of Speakers has over the years focused on enhancing the central role played by the national parliaments in raising national European awareness. This Conference is an appropriate forum to consider how this role might be further enhanced. A strong role for national parliaments in the EU matters means the EU can be brought closer to its citizens.

On this, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, as we look forward to the future , we can be optimistic that the values and the vision that lie at the heart of Europe will endure into the next 50 years and beyond.

Thank you very much.