

**COSAC – Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees
Meeting of the Troika, Chairpersons and the Working Group**

19 February 2004

Chairman,
Chairpersons of Community and European Affairs Committees,

It gives me great pleasure to address the Chairpersons of the Community and European Affairs Committees this morning, and to welcome you to Dublin. I would like to extend a particularly warm welcome to Committee Chairpersons from accession and candidate states.

Ireland, as Presidency, is actively seeking to bring the EU closer to citizens. As Chairpersons of European Affairs Committees, you play a key role in reviewing EU policy and legislative developments, and reflecting the concerns and hopes of your citizens in that domain. We therefore share a common goal.

Over the coming years, the key role that your Committees and national Parliaments play in evaluating EU policy and communicating this to citizens is set to increase. This positive development highlights the importance of today's meeting in promoting and facilitating greater cooperation and engagement between Member State Parliaments.

Communicating the EU more effectively and promoting a greater engagement of citizens in EU affairs are key objectives of the Irish Presidency. Declining voter participation in European Parliament elections and EU referenda, and increasing public apathy, signal that the Union must change. As the population of our Union grows to over 450 million citizens, we must place a renewed emphasis on pursuing actions and policies to enhance the quality of life of all citizens, and must seek to better inform citizens about the EU and engage all Europeans more directly in deciding how our Union develops.

For a new generation living in the Member States of the European Union, the horror and misery of war and the cycles of destruction and devastation that so blighted our continent for centuries are now confined to history books, thanks to European integration. For millions of Europeans using the Euro, or living, studying or working in another Member State, European integration is a tangible and positive reality. The single market, the Erasmus programme and legislation in a diverse range of policy areas have positively benefited all EU citizens. But Europeans are now demanding that an increasingly integrated Europe should be more open and transparent in its dealings with citizens and involve them more in how it takes decisions.

But how do we address the challenge of communicating Europe at EU and national level?

The defeat of the first Nice Treaty referendum in Ireland three years ago did not signal widespread opposition to EU enlargement in Ireland. On the contrary, Irish people were and remain the most enthusiastic supporters of an enlarging Union. The disappointing referendum result reflected confusion, disconnection and apathy of many citizens about the EU in Ireland and demonstrated the need for citizens to be both better informed about, and engaged in, decisions taken at EU level.

To this end, the Irish Government set about undertaking new initiatives to better inform citizens about their Union and to listen and respond more effectively to people's concerns about how the EU is evolving. These initiatives assisted in better informing the public in advance of the second referendum on the Nice Treaty in October 2002 which was endorsed by the Irish people. I would like to briefly raise two of these key initiatives here this morning; the introduction of enhanced procedures for the scrutiny of draft EU legislation, and the establishment of the National Forum on Europe.

In July 2002, the Government introduced enhanced procedures for the scrutiny by the Oireachtas (Ireland's Parliament), of draft EU legislation. These procedures were given legislative effect in the European Union (Scrutiny) Act in October 2002. Since then, a sub-committee of the Parliament's European Affairs Committee, made up of TDs (MPs) and Senators have reviewed hundreds of draft legal Acts. This sub-committee is expertly chaired by Gay Mitchell TD, who has played a key role in implementing these new procedures.

In assessing draft EU legislation at its fortnightly meetings, the Chairman and members of the sub-committee pay particular attention to the implications that legislation will have on ordinary citizens and businesses. The sub-committee meets openly, in public session. MEPs may also attend and participate in meetings, which is of particular relevance given the role of the European Parliament in the co-decision process.

But the enhanced scrutiny arrangements go beyond merely reviewing draft legislation. Each month the Minister for Foreign Affairs (or Ministers of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs) meet with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Affairs, also chaired by Gay Mitchell, to brief members about forthcoming policy and legislative developments at General Affairs and External Relations Councils. Other Government Ministers also brief sectoral Committees in advance of meetings in other Council formations. These briefings take place in public session, facilitating a more open and transparent system of explaining how decisions are taken at EU level.

These initiatives have redefined how EU legislation is assessed, discussed and reviewed in Ireland and demonstrate the key role that national parliamentary committees play as an interface between the Union and its citizens in the legislative process. I would like to commend the Chairman and members of the Committee for their excellent work in this regard.

Another major step in communicating Europe came in the autumn of 2001 when the Irish Government established the National Forum on Europe. At the Forum, a range of participants from all registered political parties, civil society groups and non-governmental organisations meet to express their views on EU issues and contribute to debates about the EU in meetings held in public session. Like the Oireachtas Committee for European Affairs, the Forum frequently holds open meetings outside Dublin, affording members of the public the opportunity to participate directly in meetings and make their voices heard on EU matters.

The Government continues to undertake initiatives designed to promote better public awareness about the EU and explain to citizens how they can participate in decisions that affect their lives. In January we supported the production of television programmes shown on national television on the themes of enlargement and the Future of Europe in a viewer-friendly, factual entertainment format. The Government also continues to support NGOs and sectoral organisations in developing and disseminating group-specific information about the EU to members.

These initiatives have served to greatly improve the quality and broaden the depth of debate about the European Union in Ireland. Citizens are informed that they can make their views heard about legislative and policy developments in the EU, and have an opportunity to participate in the discussion about the future of their Union.

Ireland is also seeking to conduct its Presidency of the EU in an open, transparent and citizen-focused manner and to promote a range of policy and legislative priorities aimed at promoting the quality of life for Europeans. The theme of Ireland's Presidency is "Europeans-Working Together". We are currently working closely with partners at present to progress these priorities in which we are seeking to involve and engage citizens in the greatest possible way.

These include taking work forward on the draft Constitutional Treaty, which I will return to in a moment.

One of the highlights of Ireland's Presidency will be the accession of ten new partners in just over two months. Ireland will support the integration of the new Member States into the institutions of the European Union. We will also ensure that this historic event is commemorated and celebrated by citizens across the EU. On 1 May, we will join other Europeans in staging events throughout Ireland to celebrate enlargement. I am delighted and honoured that my own home town of Bray in Wicklow has been chosen to twin with Cyprus for the occasion. Other accession countries will be welcomed by towns and cities across Ireland.

During our Presidency, we will also seek to promote and pursue a broad range of policy and legislative proposals aimed at promoting sustainable growth and economic development in our continent, policies which will benefit all Europeans in a real and tangible way.

At the Spring European Council we will seek to reinvigorate the Lisbon Strategy by progressing initiatives aimed at creating sustainable growth, more and better jobs, and a more secure economic climate for citizens across the EU. But we are also seeking to ensure that citizens are informed and engaged in debates on these issues. I am pleased to note that members of the National Forum on Europe are reviewing and discussing this issue in another part of Dublin Castle as we speak.

Ireland, as Presidency, is also seeking to advance the areas of freedom, security and justice, to create a safer and more secure Union for all Europeans and in doing so meet the concerns of citizens in this regard.

And let us not lose sight of the draft Constitutional Treaty. As the Irish Government representative at the Convention on the Future of Europe, I was delighted that the draft Treaty was drafted in an open and transparent manner, marking a radical but welcome change in how the EU prepares Treaty change. The draft Treaty itself offers citizens a concise and more coherent constitution setting out the core values and objectives on which our Union is built.

Ireland welcomes the enhanced role that the draft Treaty outlines for National Parliaments. I understand that COSAC is currently discussing how the so-called "yellow card" system on proposals which may breach the principle of subsidiarity, might be implemented. This system would strengthen the role of parliamentarians in expressing their views on the necessity for, and effectiveness of, draft EU legislation, and in this regard this initiative must be welcomed.

The Protocol on National Parliaments also endorses the scrutiny functions of Member State Parliaments and recommends that Parliaments be provided directly with legislative proposals by institutions, and be given enough time to scrutinise such proposed legislation. This will serve to strengthen the role of national parliamentarians in representing their citizens concerns about developments in the European Union, and is another positive initiative.

As Presidency, Ireland is committed to making every effort to advance final agreement on a new Constitutional Treaty and we are continuing to work closely with partners in this regard.

I mentioned earlier that initiatives aimed at Communicating Europe must be undertaken at two levels; national and European. Your Parliamentary Committees play an important role in explaining the EU to citizens and reflecting their views and concerns. I believe that it is important that Member States share their experiences of communicating Europe just as you do here in COSAC. For this reason, we have decided to convene an Informal Ministerial Conference on Communicating Europe during our Presidency. I have invited Ministers and Secretaries of State from all existing, acceding and candidate states to attend this Conference to discuss and assess how we might better communicate the EU to citizens. The Presidents of the European

Parliament and the European Commission, and representatives of Western Balkan states have also been invited to attend the Conference.

The Conference will take place over two days in Wicklow on April 7/8 next. On the first day of the Conference, Ministers will assess and discuss communications strategies, before reviewing future initiatives that might be undertaken to better inform and engage citizens in the EU.

On the second day of the Conference, representatives from Ireland's National Forum on Europe and delegates from European Civil society organisations will meet with Ministers in a public meeting to exchange views on promoting the involvement of citizens in the EU. This is an innovation for an EU Presidency, and, I believe it reflects the premium Ireland places on contact with Parliaments -and through the democratic process- with citizens.

I am pleased that partners have welcomed this Presidency initiative, and that Minister Atzo Nicolai has agreed to build on work undertaken during the Irish Presidency and carry this important issue forward into the Dutch Presidency.

As our Union grows, I look forward to working even more closely with all of our partners to achieve our shared objective of building a stronger Union for Europe's citizens.

I would like to thank you all for travelling to Dublin, and wish you every success in today's Conference. I look forward to welcoming you again in Dublin for the meeting of COSAC next May