

**Statement by the Taoiseach to the
Bertelsmann Foundation in Berlin, on 9 January, 2004**

Thank you Professor Weidenfeld.

It is both a pleasure and an honour to be invited to participate at the Bertelsmann Foundation Forum. The Foundation's work to bring greater understanding to the European Union's deepening and widening process is both timely and appropriate.

It was most appropriate, also, that one of the great supporters of the European idea was scheduled to speak here today. It is most unfortunate that Chancellor Schroeder is unable to be with us. The Chancellor has the great quality of realistic vision. His commitment to ensuring that our Union continues to deepen, widen and succeed is one of the major positive driving forces in Europe today.

As is clear from the stimulating strategic paper that the Forum has prepared for this meeting, Ireland has taken over the Presidency at a critical time for the European Union.

In preparing for this Presidency we searched for a theme that would best encapsulate our approach. In the end we chose the theme "Europeans – Working Together". It is a theme of rugged practicality. It is also a theme which captures a vision of the people of the European Union working as a team, striving together to achieve our ambitious common goals and objectives.

It is our intention that the theme “Europeans – Working Together” will inform our approach to all aspects of the work of the European Union for the coming period.

On the 1st of May we will welcome ten new members into our Union. We will once and for all end the artificial divide that has separated our peoples in Europe. This is enormously significant for the European Union and for each member state. Enlargement will bring new opportunities and new challenges.

As Presidency we will be working together with all our partners to ensure that enlargement works for each member state and for the Union as a whole. We want to see a strong and vibrant European Union ready, willing and able to accommodate further expansion in the coming years.

For the European Union to be strong and vibrant it is vitally important that it continues to prosper and succeed as it has done in the past. The ten accession countries which will formally join us next May want to be part of our success. This desire to be part of a successful European Union was strongly confirmed in referendums held last year.

In order for the European Union to continue to build on its success, it must respond positively to all the challenges it now faces. I will address later the challenge posed by the ongoing Intergovernmental Conference.

Clearly the outstanding constitutional and legal issues in the IGC are very significant. But first I want to talk about the continuing internal and external agenda of the European Union.

The day to day management of our economies has immediate and profound impacts on our citizens. That is why for the coming six months the Irish Presidency will give a particular focus to efforts to reach the economic and sustainable development goals we have set ourselves.

For the European Union to succeed into the future it must continue to moderate the forces of globalisation for the benefit of our people. The European Union has provided the framework within which Europeans have prospered. We must continue this success. To succeed we need to continue to respond to ever changing and new challenges.

Nearly four years ago in Lisbon, the European Union set itself the task of becoming the most competitive economy in the world. We said that we would create more and better jobs. We said that we would work for greater social cohesion and a high level of environmental protection. And we said that we would achieve these goals by 2010.

The Spring European Council meeting next March will allow us to focus on where we stand four years on. In preparation for this meeting I wrote to all the members of the European Council last November setting out my approach. I believe that we must now reaffirm our commitment to speedy implementation of our agreed policies.

Growth and employment are our twin priorities for the Spring European Council – sustainable growth and increased employment. At our meeting in March we will therefore concentrate on growth, competitiveness, employment and sustainability. By focussing on a limited number of key issues, I believe that we will be able to ensure that our discussions in the Spring will be productive and will inform our future actions.

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Under the Lisbon Agenda there is a wide range of policies that we must implement together. There are other elements where each individual member state must take the action that is required. Our collective and individual actions will enable us to reach our agreed goals.

There is no doubt that the Lisbon Agenda is a challenging one and that there is a lot more work to be done. We should not, however, minimise what has already been achieved. I will give you some examples: it is now much easier for workers and students to move around the European Union to access jobs and education; it is now easier to set up and run a small business; consumers are already enjoying cheaper telephone calls; and Europe's commitment to environmental protection means a cleaner and safer world for our children and our grandchildren.

We must continue the progress in these and in other areas. And we should never lose sight of the fact that economic and quality of life issues are the bread and butter of the European Union. Ensuring a better quality of life for our citizens is our ultimate aim and is what the European Union is about. Our job as Presidency is to ensure that sufficient focus is given to these issues so that the Union can continue the phenomenal success it has enjoyed for its current and new members into the future.

The Lisbon Agenda and the 2010 goals are part of the large and complex internal agenda of the European Union which we, as Presidency, will seek to move forward. The ongoing work of the Union involves continuing efforts in justice, consumer protection, competition policy and a myriad of other areas. As we have set out what we propose to do in our Presidency and Annual Programmes, I will not dwell on the detail here.

I do want to say a few words, nonetheless, about our challenging external relations agenda.

The European Union, growing to twenty-five states this year, with a population of over 450 million people producing a quarter of the world's Gross National Product is, without doubt, a global player. We face a complex, ever changing and challenging international agenda to which we must respond, based on the values that unite us: democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms.

During the next six months I will be working to ensure good outcomes from all the Summit meetings that are planned during our Presidency, including those with the US, Russia, Japan, Canada and the Latin American and Caribbean countries. We will engage across the board also with all our external partners including with our new neighbours in Europe and our partners in Africa.

From the full range of issues that we will face over the coming period there are two which I will highlight today: the need for an effective and strong multilateral system and the need to strengthen the EU – US relationship.

At the European Council last December we adopted a very significant report on European Security Strategy. In that report we emphasised that the security and prosperity of the European Union increasingly depends on an effective multilateral system. We emphasised also that the fundamental framework for international relations is the United Nations Charter.

The Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, has recently established a High Level Panel to review the major global threats and challenges to peace and security. The Panel will make recommendations to enable the UN to make an effective response to

these challenges. This is a very welcome development. As Presidency we will work with our partners to prepare the European Union's input to this Panel. In all our meetings with other regions and third countries we will encourage positive support for effective multilateralism and the UN reform agenda. We will do everything we can, working together with others, to strengthen multilateralism and create a safer, more secure and more peaceful world.

We will work with all countries of goodwill which share our objectives. In particular, we will work with the US to develop our relationship in this area. The differences that emerged last year should not cloud the fact that last October the international community came together in support of the reconstruction of Iraq. There was unanimous support for Security Council resolution 1511. We should not lose sight of the fact that we are all working together for the common objective of the earliest possible restoration of the sovereignty of the Iraqi people under a representative government.

The European Union and the United States have a relationship which is irreplaceable. Together we can be a formidable force for good in the

world. Working together through the multilateral system we can more easily achieve our common objectives and reinforce our shared values.

The European Union's relationship with the United States is a rich and multidimensional one. Not only do we share common values and objectives but the foundations of history, family and friendship underpin our economic and political ties. That is not to say that we will be in harmony on every issue all the time. Nonetheless, we need to focus on the many issues that unite us and work hard to sort out our differences when they occur.

As Presidency we will be working together with the US to ensure deeper bonds and greater understandings across the full range of our common agenda. I firmly believe that putting past differences behind us and working together to improve the trans-Atlantic partnership - with each contributing what it can – is in the very clear interests of us all.

Let me turn now to the work of the Intergovernmental Conference.

It was clearly disappointing that it was not possible to bring the Intergovernmental Conference to a definitive conclusion last month. Like others, we had very much hoped that a final agreement would be possible.

I believe strongly that the Union needs a new Constitutional Treaty, making it more effective and efficient, more accountable to its citizens, and better able to play a coherent role in the world, using Europe's combined weight to promote universal values of peace, justice and solidarity.

In the end, however, it became clear last month that the time was not ripe. A basis for compromise, in particular on the key issue of how to define a qualified majority, was not present.

The Irish Presidency was asked to consult partners, with a view to bringing a report to the Spring European Council in March.

I have now begun the consultation process, and plan to have intensive face-to-face dialogue with colleagues. I hope that in the light of these ongoing consultations it will be possible before long to assess how and when we can move ahead. I am determined to make every effort to encourage a spirit of compromise and commitment.

As Presidency, on this issue, like on all others, Ireland will be even-handed and open. Our partners may be confident that we will be motivated only by a desire to build consensus.

While the voting system remains the most difficult and the most prominent issue, it is not the only question to be resolved. Nonetheless, very good progress was made in the weeks leading to the December Intergovernmental Conference. There also seemed to be an emerging

consensus on most institutional questions, including the composition of the Commission and the Presidency.

While progress was being made there could obviously be no final agreement on any individual issue until there was an overall agreement. But the good work of the Italian Presidency, in refining the remarkable report of the European Convention, remains the obvious basis for the final stages of the negotiations.

I have no doubt that there will be eventual agreement on a Constitutional Treaty. The open questions are exactly what the nature of the agreement will be, and when it will happen.

No Presidency can compel agreement if the political circumstances are not right and in the absence of collective political will. I cannot promise that the IGC will finish in our Presidency. But, equally, it would be premature to conclude that it will not. We will be realistic, not pessimistic. If there is good reason to believe, in the light of my consultations, that agreement is possible in the first half of this year, then I will spare no effort to achieve it.

Clearly, it would be preferable were agreement to be reached as soon as possible. I believe that it would be dangerous for a vacuum to be allowed to develop. Moreover, there is a great deal in the current draft, as prepared by the Convention, which is not in dispute and which is clearly positive:

- a clearer statement of the Union's objectives and founding principles;

- greater certainty as to where its powers begin and end;
- the simplification of decision-making procedures;
- a greater role for national parliaments;
- the enhanced prominence of human rights;
- the prospect of greater coherence in the Union's external action;
- and reformed Presidency arrangements.

All of these aspects would contribute enormously to making the Union more effective in meeting the expectations of citizens and in responding to internal and external challenges.

It would also be good to resolve finally the debate about the Union's future institutional framework, which has now lasted for several years, from the time of the Amsterdam negotiations, and has been an ongoing source of tension and uncertainty within the Union.

The Union has confronted difficulties before. It has always, united, and overcome them. At a time when its core values of partnership and solidarity have never been more important, I am very confident that it will eventually succeed in this endeavour also – even if it takes more time than we had hoped.

The Irish Presidency will do all within its power to take the process forward. We will need the support of everyone – all Europeans working together. We may or may not succeed in fostering final agreement. But I can promise that we will not fail for want of commitment or determination.

Finally, let me address an issue which has been highlighted, in particular, in the wake of our European Council meeting last month.

The member states of the European Union have always sought to move forward together. This has been the European Union's strength and this united approach has served the Union well.

Under existing Treaty rules we have ways through which groups of member states can cooperate on specific subjects. Economic and Monetary Union is a specific example of this. However, these means of cooperation do not compromise the overall unity and coherence of the Union.

There are different views on ways in which the Union might or might not develop in the future. At the same time there is a broad consensus amongst all member states, that the Union's coherence and cohesion should be preserved and that the best way to move forward is together.

Recalling our theme of our Presidency "Europeans – Working Together", you may rest assured that the Irish Presidency will work to achieve

consensus in the Intergovernmental Conference and on the full range of issues on the European Union's agenda. And we will work in the interests of all member states and of the Union as a whole. Of course we will count on the support and assistance of all our partners in the European Union to help achieve our shared vision.

Thank you.

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