

1

Ireland and the Future of Europe: A European Perspective

Pat Cox

European Integration - A Peace Project

With the recent votes in the Baltic republics of Estonia and Latvia and their popular acceptance of membership of the European Union, the stage is now set on May 1 2004, for the European Union's most ambitious ever enlargement. The inclusion in the EU of the states of Central and Eastern Europe which suffered communist domination throughout the period of the cold war represents a remarkable opportunity for our old continent to make a new start on a truly continental scale. This fifth enlargement of the European Union is without doubt it's most ambitious, it's most diverse and it's most challenging. In some respects it marks the return to the central and founding purpose of the European integration process. This was captured in the seminal speech of Robert Schuman in his address delivered on the 9th of May 1950 in Paris, when he spoke of the concept of "creative reconciliation". The civilisational project of creating peace where for so long we knew only the destructive power of war marks out the essential *raison d'être* of European integration. This is it's core reason. This remains it's greatest achievement. The choice of all of the peoples of the new accession states to adhere to this project bears testament to it's enduring central value and worth. Arguably the European Union is the most successful peace project that the world has seen, too often regrettably lost in the fog of other detail.

Constitutional Convention

For seventeen months the Convention on the Future of Europe deliberated on a new constitutional treaty for this continental scale European Union of tomorrow. That draft now provides the input to an Inter Governmental Conference of all the states of the European Union, new and old, which begins it's work tomorrow in Rome and to where I shall go on behalf of European Parliament after this address.

The Convention I believe has been a remarkable success. It has managed to produce a consensus on a constitutional treaty, on the incorporation into the treaty of a charter on fundamental rights, on the granting of a legal personality to the European Union, on the simplification of European law making, on respect for the principal and practice of subsidiarity through deeper engagement of national parliaments with the annual legislative programme of the European Union. The draft constitutional treaty also proposes institutional reforms including a presidency for the European Council, a more streamlined European Commission and the creation of a new office of Foreign Minister. The political discussions on these issues are set to dominate the European Agenda for the next several months and could well, if not cleared by the Italian Presidency, spill over into the Irish Presidency of the EU which begins on January 1st next.

The Constitutional Treaty and Values

In today's context let me remark on religion in the proposed draft constitutional treaty. The dominant debate has centred on the question as to whether there should be a reference to Christianity in the preamble to this treaty. Currently no such reference is found although there is a reference to our religious heritage. At recent conferences that I addressed in Italy I had the impression that this issue of form, regarding the preamble, risked to divert attention from the substance, with regard to draft treaty provisions. The charter on fundamental

rights repeats and respects the right of freedom of religious practice of the individual. Moreover, article 51 for the first time at a European level, recognises religious communities as such and goes on to guarantee that nothing in this draft treaty would override or replace existing national constitutional provisions regarding religious communities and their rights. However, when it comes to the substantive values which underpin this constitutional treaty I believe for those, like me, who believe in a Europe of values that we should not allow this moment of definition and victory to be turned by polemics into an apparent defeat, whatever the outcome on the debate on the preamble. Let us avoid snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

Pluralist Democracy

The European Union for the first time in a treaty will specify its objectives and values, not before its time. First among these values is a belief in pluralist democracy. This is not to make the unsustainable claim that this value derives from the union nor, even less, that it is an invention of the European process. That it is a central criterion for membership nevertheless is beyond dispute. It is not by accident that Greece joined the EU after the collapse of the junta led by the Colonels. Nor is it by accident that Spain and Portugal joined after the demise of their respective dictators, Franco and Salazar, nor that today, it is after an era of communist totalitarianism that the newly re-independent democracies of Central and Eastern Europe chose to anchor their democracy in the European Union.

Human Rights

The European Union also believes in the promotion of individual and minority human rights and in respect for the rule of law. I am proud of the fact that the European Union and its member states, including by

referendum here in Ireland, has promoted the establishment of the International Criminal Court and by so doing has asserted a belief in the international rule of law in fighting genocide and crimes against humanity. In the European Parliament we believe that an International Criminal Court with its due process is better than Guantanamo Bay any day.

Solidarity

Solidarity is also a European key value both within the Union and between the Union and the rest of the world. We in Ireland know to our economic and social advantage the value of European solidarity freely given through structural and cohesion funds to help us catch up with other EU states. As the collapse of the WTO talks at Cancun showed recently there remains an inevitable tension between values and interests. Nevertheless, I am proud of the fact that for all its deficiencies, the European Union and its member states constitute the largest donor community in the world of untied, non-military aid. In addition we are the largest donor community of humanitarian food aid. In the sum of these policy initiatives annually we outspend the United States by a factor of more than two and a half to one.

Sustainability

“Care of the Earth” is one of the visions of CORI. The European Union has been a leading voice in the debate on sustainability as a policy value. Again I am proud of the role played by the Union and its political institutions on the Kyoto Protocol and on our contribution to the Johannesburg Summit one year ago. These values progressively are finding expression not just in the external policies of the union but also internal policies regarding environment, agriculture and industry.

Cultural Diversity

Another value, close to my heart as an Irish European, is a respect for cultural diversity. We will never build a legitimate European Union if it runs counter to people's sense of national and personal identity. This challenge requires already, as I know in the European Parliament, major attention to detail and investment on our part. With ten new member states entering next year they will bring with them nine new languages as the badges of their identity. Currently we are hiring staff and building systems to cope with this linguistic challenge. This is not simply for the comfort of members elected from the new states but rather represents an investment in linguistic diversity which allows media and citizens in any of those states to follow all of our work if and when they should choose to do so.

These are the values which suffuse and permeate the new constitutional treaty and which animate and anchor the work of today's Union. They are wholly consonant with Irish values and should make us feel easy when debating our common European future in the months to come.