

# Speech by President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins: Solidarity in Europe – Achieving Authenticity In The European Street

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Despite the history of our continent, many centuries of which were tarnished by war, suffering, expropriation of resources and exploitation of colonised peoples, the European Union today faces a unique opportunity and responsibility to assert, indeed where necessary reassert, its founding values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in a world in which those values are increasingly challenged.

Solidarity in Europe must be, I suggest, the foundation on which our Union's action is built. It must be the star which guides our action at home and in the wider world.

We have entered a period when, for the first time in many years, the future shape of the EU has become a matter of contestation and debate. In the shadow of Brexit and of social forces which have given rise to so much doubt across Europe, we Europeans are invited to define, through deliberation, the outlines of the Union we seek.

The so-called Future of Europe debate has been launched because we need together to identify the significant reforms which are needed to reconnect the EU with its citizens. If we fail in that aim, the debate would serve little purpose. In contributing to that debate, I strongly share President Macron's view that our Union must be renewed and rebuilt from below.

Our first obligation to Europe is to understand the nature of the European Project, the nature, form and aspirations for the Union we seek to make and to explain not only what is but what might be better to our citizens. While reform should be our driving aim, if we fail to understand or recognise what is failing, the fulness of what is in need of reform, we will likely set our course in the wrong direction. We must understand Europe in all its complexity if we are to preserve and strengthen it.

We must above all avoid being trapped in any single paradigm of thought. We can, for example, achieve a reworking of economic strategies by re-locating economics within culture, within a political economy. I would like to mention briefly just three points which seem to me fundamental to understanding our Union.

## Political economy and culture

First, we must understand the diverse roots of the European project. One of the most morally compelling visions of European internationalism – considered as one of founding documents of European integration – emerged from the Italian resistance movement, in the manifesto composed in 1941 on the island of Ventotene by Altiero Spinelli, a member of the Italian Communist Party, and his colleagues.

That is not, of course, to say that the EU did not have other important roots reflecting other political persuasions, but it is to give the lie to any idea that in its conception the European project was simply and exclusively about capital and markets.

Indeed, while the seminal Schuman Declaration, drawn up in 1950 by the visionary Christian Democrat who gave the document its name, spoke of production it also spoke of peace, and while it spoke of modernisation and markets it also spoke of equalising and improving living conditions and workers.

This is a breadth of vision we need to-day. It is a breadth of vision so many of our European citizens see us as having lost.

The objectives to which the Union commits itself, which are now contained in Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union, reflect *inter alia* the inheritance of some of the most egalitarian and humane traditions which, although their origin is by no means confined to Europe, saw an important flourishing in Europe. The rich scholarship, philosophy, moral instinct and generous impulse that contributed to and drew on an enriched European thought yielded an impulse towards the promotion of social justice and protection, equality between men and women, solidarity between generations, economic and social cohesion and solidarity between Member States. These principles lie at the very root of the European project and reach their fullest European expression today in the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The second point I would like to underline concerns our way of doing business. The European Union's culture of accommodation, respect and compromise has been with us so long that perhaps we now take it for granted.

Europe's decision-making process is complex, painstaking and can be frustrating. Like every human construct, it is imperfect. It makes mistakes, sometimes big mistakes. But our calm, respectful and, when we are at our best, rational way of doing business, underpinned crucially by the rule of law, should never be taken for granted on a continent which has been the scene and the source of so much suffering.

It should never be taken for granted by countries which, even recently, have known dictatorship. It cannot be taken for granted by small countries which know all too well the realities of power when it is unconstrained by institutions in which all are represented and by the binding rule of law. And equally it should not be ignored by large countries which may be

tempted by the illusion that in a modern world of globalised trade and finance they can go it alone.

We should always strive to improve the way we work in the EU and be vigilant when its principles are called into question, but we should also celebrate it by giving authentic credence to its values and their sources. We must not allow those values which citizens need to be drowned out by a disconnected set of discourses from different silos as it were, giving us silo speak rather than citizen speak.

My third point about understanding Europe goes back to a point I made at the outset, namely that people, our citizens, and the citizens of the planet, must always be foremost in our thoughts and in our endeavours. It is thus imperative that we not only find better ways of explaining to people how Europe works but also better ways of learning from people what form of Europe they want. The opportunity of the current debate about the future of Europe must not be squandered.

Jacques Delors once said that “Europe does not just need fire-fighters, it needs architects too”. It is important therefore, as he implied, to take opportunities to raise our eyes above the road immediately ahead and shift our gaze towards the horizon, to look beyond the immediate roadblocks to consider where we are heading and whether we need to adjust our direction.

## **Solidarity**

Solidarity was in the DNA of the founders of the European Union so when our solidarity is inadequate or lacking we call into question our very nature. Solidarity is not a possession to be stored away. It must be a living impulse. It must be no mere aspiration but something of concrete achievement and policy decision to which we can point.

Internal and external solidarity are necessarily linked. One of the great tasks of the next decade will be to achieve cohesiveness within the communities and between the communities of our common European home. It is only by achieving that goal – by rebuilding our capacity and willingness to work together to lead fulfilling lives in all spheres of human activity – that Europe can play the full leadership role of which it is capable in confronting the global challenges which are common to all humanity: the pressing demand for just and sustainable development; the imperative of vindicating the human rights of those fleeing war, persecution and famine; and above all the urgent necessity to address the causes of climate change and to mitigate its consequences.

The most urgent task is to rebuild its internal cohesion on the principle of solidarity. I have no doubt that the EU has within it the capacity to bring into being a new discourse that leads to a fairer, more inclusive Union. To achieve that we must, as a first step, be ready to challenge failed and failing paradigms. Let us not forget, as we meet in Florence which provides Galileo’s final resting place, that more than 400 years ago the Roman Inquisition described Galileo’s

belief that the earth revolves around the sun as “foolish and absurd in philosophy and formally heretical”.

Surely all of us who seek a Union capable of accomplishing these great tasks before in this century cannot rely on any failed orthodoxies, whether in thought or action. If we are ready to challenge old and unconvincing certainties, to have the open minds which real scholarship requires, then we can preserve and even strengthen the vision of the European Union. In doing that we can re-energise a model in which the peoples of other continents have placed, perhaps increasingly place, their hopes.

## **No neoliberal charter**

As we consider the strengthening of European solidarity, it is essential to recognise that the Founding Treaty of the European Union, while some might wish it were so, was far from being a neoliberal charter. The Union, properly interpreted, was not envisaged to consecrate private profit over public purpose. Rather the Union was to be a bedrock of profound values and overarching rules. Above all it should be seen as a process – a context for creative and open debate between our elected Governments; a structure for framing and evolving policy through democratic and open discussion in our institutions and parliaments. It is vital that that debate and discussion be enriched by contributions from wider society, including academia. The emphasis must be on a courageous questioning untrammelled by preconceptions.

In strengthening internal solidarity, it is important to recognise that the challenges we face are not just economic. They are social, political and cultural. The market must not be accepted as an unregulated market, as end point rather than instrument. Human beings, all of our citizens, must be at the heart of our endeavours. We are, after all, the best of our moral social scholarship tells us, social beings, not simply consumers, targets, to be treated as commodities within a totalising version of an unregulated and insatiable market.

The dignity of work, therefore, in all its facets and in its essence as a shared human activity, must be at the centre of the values by which we want to live. A first and urgent task must be to restore sustainable and fulfilling employment to EU citizens.

There is nothing more corrosive to society and more crushing to the individual than endemic unemployment, or the insecurity and uncertainty of the vulnerability of a precariat.

Unemployment in the EU has come down and we should welcome that. Yet, there are still nearly 18 million men and women without work. More shockingly, nearly 18% of our young people are unemployed, with the figure being much higher in some Member States. Where short term work has been created it is too often precarious work. We must definite and create work in a way that can provide the necessary self-fulfilment and protections of the worker.

We must be cautious too when we use words such as ‘populism’. Populism must not be confused with popular will. However, we must at the same time be very forthright in

condemning the rise of those populists who, through the fomenting of fear, relentlessly exploit the anxieties of the vulnerable and the frustration of those who are left behind. Nothing would give more succour to abuses of such populism than for us to fail to create equal and just societies with real opportunities for participation.

## **Let's go social**

The European Union, given the political will, and its strong legal framework and tradition, could – if it demonstrates imagination and determination in addressing its own challenges – make a significant contribution in confronting the excessive deregulation and erosion of rights that is emerging at global level.

However, to do that we need to revisit the relationship between economic and social policy in a fundamental way. While I therefore warmly welcome the convening of the Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth in Gothenburg in November last year which aimed at boosting growth, creating fair jobs and fostering equal opportunities, and see it as a step towards creating a strong and tangible social dimension, obviously much further progress is needed. The Summit's recognition of the need to put people first and that employment and social progress are first and foremost created on the ground was a good starting point.

It was an attempt, I would suggest, to reconnect with the European social model which is rooted in our recent history and which recognises that solidarity among citizens and social cohesion are values that must be fostered and maintained – not as mere by-products of, or compensations for, as residual of a successful economy but as foundational elements of economy in their own right. Our leadership, our authenticity in terms of concern for our citizens is tested by our willingness, or lack of it, to embrace new paradigms of practice and theory, including in the economy to emerge; our willingness to allow what is failing to be discarded, to make way for what needs to be born.

The 20 principles set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights which was proclaimed by the Gothenburg Summit are a step forward and many of them point generally in the right direction. But Europe needs to go further and to start by delivering on the commitments which it has made.

The principles agreed in Gothenburg indicate, for example, that everyone has a right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning; that employment relationships that lead to precarious working conditions shall be prevented; and that workers have the right to fair wages that provide for a decent standard of living.

Such good principles cannot be allowed to remain aspirational; if they do they will merely feed into the disillusion which is evident in so much of our society. The agreed principles must now, urgently, be transformed into principles of practice supported by Member States. Pending social legislation should be driven forward and the further necessary legislation should be

tabled. This is essential if the social principles are to achieve authenticity on the European Street.

There are, of course, other priorities on the European agenda: the completion of the single market, including the digital single market, and of the Banking Union as well as the next steps towards Economic and Monetary Union. A sufficient basis for the legitimisation of such developments depends on a prior achievement of social cohesion.

## **Defending multilateralism**

Solidarity should also characterise Europe's approach to the wider world. In speaking of Europe's external role, we should acknowledge that the role of this continent over the centuries, as seen by much of the world, has often not been a glorious one. There is nothing essentially moral in the varying practices of Europeans or the role our members have played in history; even if, needless to say, many Europeans have made very positive contributions to our world.

The warm East-West relations that have been created between Ireland and its neighbours required a facing of the past on both of our parts. Surely it would be positive, let us take the relationship between European nations and Africa, that a similar clearing of the past take place, with the aim of not losing the opportunity for dialogue in the present and our joint hopes for the future.

In all humility but with every confidence, Europe should take as its starting point the urgent and growing need to defend multilateralism.

Multilateralism is an important form of solidarity. It provides a context in which solidarity makes sense and can have maximum effect. In a world in which insularity often seems to be taking hold, in which for some patriotism and selfishness are increasingly intertwined, in which there are those who would even beat their ploughshares back into swords, the European Union has both an opportunity and a responsibility to provide leadership on the importance of working together through agreed institutions.

Resiling to the inevitability of war, abandoning the prospect of peace, reviving the literacy of democracy – these are choices that will, in how they are made, define the very future of multi-lateral institutions.

Recently I spoke at the United Nations as to the importance of not allowing the strut of the most powerful, and the arms industry, to drown out the whispers from the gallery of the UN that yearn for peace, the elimination of poverty, freedom for minorities, respect for indigeneity.

The UN lies at the very heart of the multilateral system. Like all human organisations, it can lay no claim to perfection. To cite just one example, the UN Security Council should become more representative of the wider international community, in particular the global south. The UN's

weaknesses, however, are no reason to talk it down. Rather they constitute every reason for building it up.

The UN remains the essential framework for the assertion of global values and provides the only global context for aspiring to the solidarity of all humanity. The European Union and its Member States must continue to work strongly in support of the United Nations with which they share not only important values but also a fundamental commitment to multilateralism as a way of doing business.

Europe has an important role, through the UN and elsewhere. By working with others to defend human rights, democracy and the rule of law while avoiding hubris, and in no sense claiming perfection for ourselves, the European Union now finds itself in a context that offers leadership, a role which we should take forward, obviously with full respect for others on the one hand, but with determination on the other, offering a strong diplomacy, new mechanisms for achieving peace, avoiding the lure of the international arms industry and its advocates.

## **Sustainable development**

The Sustainable Development Goals can be seen as a charter for global solidarity. They challenge all of us to deal with trade, debt, the environment, intellectual and spiritual freedom, as well as cultural diversity, in a spirit of justice, partnership and mutual solidarity. I am proud of the leadership role that Ireland played in the negotiation of those goals.

The international community must now commit to the implementation of the SDGs and to realising their full potential. Europe carries three separate responsibilities in taking forward those goals: the responsibility of history; the responsibility of an inclusive and sustainable prosperity; and the responsibility which flows from our values, including notably the principle of solidarity.

Africa offers Europe both a particular challenge and an opportunity to bring new models of a connection between economy, ethics, and sustainable ecology. The EU itself and its Member States constitute the largest aid donors to the African continent. However, Europe should collectively to do much more on a continent where so many still suffer from hunger but which at the same time has so much potential for the future.

While Europe should continue to help to build resilient and accountable states in Africa, states which will deliver for their young populations and which in future can be strong partners with us in achieving sustainability. Europe's willingness to transact the previous relationship with Africa with the new scholarship of contemporary Africa would be of immense assistance. The EU should give a lead in removing the impediments to the transfer of the science and technology which Africa needs to achieve sustainability and respond to climate change.

Climate change is not only an environmental challenge but also a challenge of security, development and justice – it is an existential threat to our planet. The Paris Agreement in 2015,

of course, left very significant challenges ahead. However, when compared with the disappointing failures of the past, the acceptance of the scientific reality of climate change and the reflection of that reality in a universal, legally-binding agreement remains of immense significance. What is required now, first and foremost, is that all of those who made commitments must stand by them and deliver on them. The Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres, has rightly insisted at last year's Climate Conference in Bonn that our duty to future generations also requires us to raise our level of ambition.

The EU's contribution is central to what has been achieved on climate change and European leadership is now required more than ever in taking forward that achievement. In this area also, Europe's approach must rediscover fully its founding value of solidarity. Climate justice demands that those countries and peoples who have least contributed to the problem of climate change should not be expected to pay the highest price to resolve it. Priority should therefore be given to accelerating support to the Least Developed Countries including the mobilisation of the necessary resources.

## Migration

Perhaps the greatest current challenge which Europe faces in terms of solidarity relates to migrants. As Pope Francis has reminded us, "migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity". The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants delivered a strong message of solidarity and contains detailed commitments which, if implemented, would ensure a more humane, dignified and compassionate response by the international community to the plight of refugees and migrants. I'm pleased that Ireland played an important role as co-facilitator of that Declaration. However, the consequences of the continued failure to transform into effective action the promises which have been made are often evident and sometimes tragic.

Clearly the issue of migration in Europe is complex and sensitive, not least because of the threat of significant forces in our societies today which seek to exploit people's fears and to use opportunities to direct those fears against those whom they portray as different from ourselves. This should not make us hesitate from providing the new institutional, including financial, arrangements appropriate for a collective response.

Let me say in conclusion that I believe we should remain committed to the European vision and to the potential for the founding principles of Europe to provide the foundations of a renewed and strengthened Union. To make that possible, we need a creative and courageous vision at this crucial moment in the history of our continent. I believe that what is required is for us to rediscover the enabling and inspiring principle of solidarity, solidarity within the Union and solidarity with the wider world.

If I may, I will conclude by returning to Michelangelo who once observed that: "every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it".



We are in a sense the sculptors of this European generation, still working on a block of valuable marble which has been passed down to us from the Union's founding fathers. If solidarity remains our guiding principle, I have no doubt that our European future, the outlines of which we can see but much of which remains to be discovered by our own chisels, will be a source of pride for ourselves and an object of admiration for others.