

**The Challenge of Change:
Northern Ireland and Europe**

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**Speaking Notes
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Lord Mayor, Mayor, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentleman,

First let me congratulate Belfast City Council, Newry and Mourne Council, Louth County Council and Mediation Northern Ireland for organising this convention on the Challenge of Change in Northern Ireland.

I am also pleased to note that the EU funded Peace II programme has helped to bring this about.

It is true to say that change in Northern Ireland - whether it be in the transition from the Troubles to a more stable society, in the economic change reflected in growing prosperity or in wider societal changes - is reshaping this part of Europe for the better.

Having lived and worked outside Northern Ireland for 24 years before returning home 3 years ago to head up the EC office, I have witnessed many of those changes at first hand.

Yet dramatic change also poses new challenges and problems which must be understood and faced up to if Northern Ireland is to keep moving forward.

Throughout its 50-year history the European Union has gone through a constant process of change and evolution.

In the time that is available to me I will look at the EU experience of dealing with change and diversity and see if it provides any lessons for Northern Ireland. Internal and external changes have shaped the Europe we know today and I will argue that Northern Ireland too must come to terms with both internal and external influences.

I have worked for the EU for some 18 years now in different guises and have been privileged to get an inside view of how different sovereign member states, politicians and civil servants with different

languages, cultures, traditions and legal and administrative systems have striven to work together.

The EU has been described as many things

The description that appeals to be most is that of John Hume who described **the EU as the most successful peace project that the world has seen.**

Why has the EU succeeded in building long lasting stability, political and economic cooperation amongst such a diverse range of countries and peoples?

According to Bobby McDonagh, an Irish civil servant, who worked for many years within the EU, the European integration process has worked because there is a collective ethos in the EU which ***“combines the pursuit of interests with the accommodation of difference.”***

It is about diverse peoples acting together at a European level to manage political and economic change and turn this into an asset and advantage rather than a threat.

So in a nutshell, it seems to me that the EU experience of the challenge of change has been to try to shape it a way that brings overall advantage while at the same time accommodating and protecting diversity. **At the very least, cooperation has been a matter of self-interest for European countries.**

To understand the process of managing change the EU way, we need to go back to the beginnings and reflect briefly on where the European Union has come from?

The first moves towards European economic and political cooperation came in the aftermath of the 2nd World War.

That Europe of our parents and grandparents was one that is markedly different to today's Europe.

They were brought up in an era when the big powers were not at peace. Rivalry and nationalism had led to two World Wars in the first part of the last century. Our parents and grandparents had to live with the terrible consequences of a Europe that was not at peace.

The EU was born out of the ashes of the 2nd World War, a conflict that had led to the deaths of some 50 million people and the displacement of many millions.

It came into being in the 1950's to help ensure that the big powers in Europe – Germany, France, Italy and Britain – would never go to war against each other again.

From the early days until the present the challenge has always been the same; to reconcile national identity with the need for international cooperation and interdependence.

Part of this challenge has been to come to terms with the terrible happenings of the past, and move on - move on in a fashion that did not attempt to forget the past but to accommodate differences.

55 years on from the setting up of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 and then the European Economic Community in 1957, the turnaround in Europe has been remarkable.

Today the EU is a model of international cooperation that it is built on the accommodation of difference and diversity. It is a model that is admired across the world.

At its core are a number of essential values that underpin democracy in countries across Europe.

These are laid out in Article 1-2 of the Treaty establishing a constitution for Europe.

“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These

values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between men and women prevail.”

Article 1-3 (1) goes on to state that the aim of the EU is “to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its people.”

The EU has grown over the years from 6 to 25 countries; soon to be 27 countries with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania. Over the same period its responsibilities have also grown quite substantially.

Successive enlargements of the EU have augmented the degree of diversity through an increase in cultures, languages, traditions, minorities, as well as economic and regional disparities.

Each enlargement – from the accession of the UK in 1973 to the accession of former communist countries in 2004 – has brought changes and new challenges.

How has the EU responded to such profound changes?

In order to cope with change, the EU has had to update and rewrite its founding treaties from Rome to Nice.

It has brought forward the Charter of Fundamental rights.

In addition, the fall of the Berlin Wall forced the EU in the early 1990’s to clarify the conditions that new countries would have to meet if they wished to join the club.

Known as the Copenhagen criteria, these put democracy, open economies and basic values of tolerance, respect of human rights and the rule of law central to the process of accession to the EU.

Combined with active political and economic engagement these conditions have proved to be powerful agents for change in countries aspiring to join the EU.

These forces are currently at work in the EU's negotiations with countries such Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Turkey.

According to Mark Leonard, a well known commentator on the development of the EU: *“Europe doesn't change countries by threatening to invade them: its biggest threat is having nothing at all to do with them.”* He goes on to argue that the promise of eventual membership has transformed countries as diverse as Poland and Romania.

Beside enlargement, the biggest change currently facing Europe and the world as whole is globalisation.

Indeed fears surrounding globalisation are currently unsettling the EU and some fear it could put a brake on further enlargement. In the European Commission's view, EU countries need to build a new consensus on future EU enlargement in the interest of Europe as a whole.

It is increasingly clear that Europe needs to come to terms with the new economic challenges that are coming from the emergence of China and India and other Asian economies. The information and communication revolution is also reshaping the world's economy and the way we do business.

Combined with an ageing population, globalisation is posing major new challenges for the European economic model. It has already brought social and economic tensions in some European countries. In response some have attempted to shelter behind protectionism while others such as the UK and Ireland have signed up to liberal, open economies. Clearly neither the EU as whole nor any of its constituent parts are immune from such changes.

So can the EU make any real contribution to the challenge of change now facing Northern Ireland both at home and from abroad?

Yes, I believe it has and can continue to do so.

Firstly, it serves as a model for building peace and reconciliation and for accommodating diversity.

Secondly, the EU has made a substantial contribution through the structural funds and the Peace programme to help this region move forward economically and socially in the aftermath of the Troubles.

The next round of PEACE funding will ascribe closely to the 'Shared Future' agenda.

Thirdly, it has encouraged Northern Ireland to raise employment and social standards and tackle discrimination and inequality across the board.

It has facilitated new ways of working through the development of partnership which has had a major positive impact across many sectors in Northern Ireland. Europe has shown the value of partnership.

Northern Ireland has benefited greatly from the exchange of experience and best practice that comes with EU membership

Perhaps above all it has helped to broaden our horizons which in turn can bring new and wider perspectives to the challenge of change in Northern Ireland.

Because of its EU membership and better economic times Northern Ireland is being exposed to a new factor of change - the arrival of increasing numbers of young people from the new EU countries seeking to work and live amongst us.

As our previous speaker said, there is evidence from elsewhere that suggests that such diversity can enrich countries, particularly from economic and cultural aspects.

As well as boosting the local economy and meeting labour shortages, the recruitment of overseas workers in Northern Ireland from Europe

and further afield provides new opportunities for enrichment of the region which is to be welcomed.

Looking ahead Northern Ireland's relationship with the rest of the EU need to be reviewed and given a new focus. Up to now Europe has been seen as a 'pot of money' and a source of regulation.

With the bulk of future EU funding from next year rightly going to the much poorer new EU countries in Eastern Europe, Northern Ireland will need to focus more on what is coming out of Brussels in terms of legislation and policy.

I say that because the EU is often the driver of important policy change that in time comes to impact on the local economy, local government etc. **Northern Ireland cannot afford not to engage decisively when such policy is being formulated.**

Positive engagement can also bring dividends for Northern Ireland in terms of building new relationships with other regions of Europe and in building a positive image for Northern Ireland abroad.

Conclusion

Over the last 60 years European countries have had to face up to the challenge of change.

The terrible happenings of the first half of the 20th century placed an imperative on Europe's leaders after the ending of the 2nd World war to respond and to explore new ways of international cooperation. Old models had not worked.

Beginning with successful cooperation on economic issues, which was then gradually extended to other areas – through the vehicles of the EEC, EU, NATO, Council of Europe – European countries have wrestled with change and found ways of accommodating differences for the mutual benefit of all. 60 years on, Europeans have made war between European countries unthinkable.

Division has been replaced by the acceptance of diversity: division has been replaced by pan European institutions and working arrangements that strive to maximise the potential of diversity.

Today there are many differences within the EU; between north and south, small and large countries, rich and poor, original six and later entrants, states with strong regions etc.

To cope with such great variety, the EU has had to adapt and refine its values and policies as it has grown and evolved. The treaties have been updated; ways of doing business have inevitably changed.

The increased size and diversity of an EU of 25 countries continues to pose significant challenges. This will not change; indeed I would contend that the constant challenge of change has helped the EU to evolve and indeed to flourish.

Europe also changed for the better with the collapse of communism. EU countries embraced the opportunities presented by that momentous change, reunited Europe and helped spread stability and prosperity to a greater part of the continent. The enlargement of the EU to Eastern Europe has been one of its greatest successes.

The EU is still coming to terms with some of the consequences of that. Globalisation is bringing fresh changes and uncertainties.

The pace of change - be it from within or from outside the EU - remains a constant challenge for EU governments and institutions. But if the EU can continue to find new ways of dealing with this then the diversity that it encompasses should be manageable.

Change is like paying taxes and death; they are all inevitable. It is a bit more difficult to shape change for the overall good.

Europe's experience of the last 50 years is that it is well worth the effort but that it needs commitment and vision from political leaders if it is to work.

The benefits of change in Europe are clear and even taken for granted – stability, economic prosperity, freedom of movement etc. A growing number of European countries have benefited from embracing the many changes that Europe has witnessed over the last 60 years. Other countries are queuing up to join the EU so that they too can benefit.

In the last 10 years in particular, Northern Ireland has reaped the benefits of both internal and external change. The challenge is to maintain that momentum into the future as well as coming to terms with fresh challenges such as inward migration and the economic impact of globalisation.

I will finish with a line from the ‘Letter of the Week’ which appeared in the Newry Democrat a couple of weeks ago. It was a letter about ending sectarianism.

“In reality nothing will change until we decide to choose a different way”.

That is something for all of us to reflect upon.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to taking part in your discussions.