

Statement by An Taoiseach

Review of the Irish Presidency / MFF

European Parliament Plenary Session

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President of the European Parliament,
President of the European Commission,
Distinguished leaders of the political groups,
Members of the European Parliament.

As Taoiseach, I'm proud to speak to the European Parliament, in this Review of the Irish Presidency and the MFF. Ireland's seventh Presidency of the Council concluded on Sunday. A hectic final week, ending an extraordinarily-busy and productive six months.

Through the support and partnership of the European Parliament, Ireland's Presidency achieved significant results. I thank you for your confidence and your commitment as we discharged our Presidential duties.

When I last addressed you it was to mark a new Presidency in a New Year. I spoke of what we would do, of the urgent need to get results. Today I am proud to say we have achieved them.

President Schulz, Honourable Members. Six months ago, I set out our objectives, based on the three pillars of Stability, Jobs and Growth. We set out to make good on our commitments, in particular, those made at the highest political level. We could do no less. Since, at this difficult juncture, it was imperative that our citizens and the markets see clear evidence that our Union could, and would, follow through on commitments made.

Such follow-through has been the hallmark of the Irish Presidency. I believe what we have achieved in that regard has bolstered the credibility of our Union, its role and work, in the eyes of our people. Since we assumed the Presidency after a particularly torrid period, achieving and sustaining stability was an obvious and key goal.

Banking union was of critical importance. We needed to repair, renovate, our banks to do two vital things. Firstly, generate sustainable economic growth. Secondly, to prove to our citizens they could depend to us to do what we said we would do at the meeting of

Heads of State and Government. Which was to sever the link between banks and sovereigns.

The follow-through achieved in the Irish Presidency was seen in three further developments. The new, single supervisor. Stronger capital rules for banks. And, just last week, in agreeing new rules for bank wind downs. These new bank resolution rules will protect taxpayers from having to bail out the banks again.

Equally in our Presidency, we also worked to put in place positive drivers for growth and job creation across Europe. When it comes to those all-important jobs, to sustain our families, our communities, trade is crucial.

So we concentrated on securing agreement on the mandate for EU-US talks. Such agreement is essential to what should be a game-changing Transatlantic Partnership - one based on an equal and open relationship. This will allow us to turn the enormous potential for jobs and growth into reality.

SMEs are the lifeblood of job creation. So we made Europe's small businesses a priority, every step of the way. For example, we managed to achieve the political agreement that will make it easier for our SMEs to access the EU's two trillion euro public procurement market through a simpler and cheaper bid process. With this everybody wins. More bids, governments can get better value for money, our small businesses can really compete and expand.

Research and Development is something this Parliament holds dear. The 70-billion euro Horizon 2020 programme agreed in principle last week is crucial in terms of R&D. The proportion of such funds taken up by SMEs should go up by one-third.

But we could have done little or none of this without the close co-operation of the institutions. Securing agreement with the European Parliament on the EU's Common Agricultural Policy for the next seven years has been one of our Presidency's most important achievements. It will greatly enhance our efforts to transform our agriculture and fisheries industries into sustainable, 'green' sectors for growth.

I welcome the Parliament's strong support for the 16-billion euro Erasmus-Plus programme. Like many here I am a fan of Umberto Eco. We believe that it is indeed 'culture not war that cements our amazing 70-year-old peace'.

I am especially happy with work done on the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund. This will provide real support for an important section of our society - our redundant workers. We can never underestimate the layers or depth of trauma of a hard worker being made redundant.

Throughout our Presidency we maintained a strong focus on those all-important high-potential sectors such as digital. Equally, we made major progress on data protection and legislation on e-identification. Both of which I know are at the heart of your own agenda.

We made headway too on issues such as the European Protection Order, Access to Lawyers in Criminal Proceedings, and Insolvency. We concluded, successfully, the historic negotiations that will allow the Union to accede to the European Convention of Human Rights. Extending the same standards of protection to our citizens in their dealings with the EU institutions as when dealing with their own governments.

We have also shown significant leadership in the area of CSDP - Capability Development, Maritime Surveillance and Cyber Security. In addition, we have laid the initial groundwork for the thematic discussion on Defence at the December European Council.

But there has been one, signal issue of Ireland's Presidency. Our absolute commitment to ending the horror of youth unemployment. It is an abomination against our young men and women. Too many of whom have reached working age but have yet to know and feel what it is like to get up and have a job to go to. The sense of purpose and pride and dignity of a job well done.

Our Union must be 100 per cent sure that we will not allow youth unemployment to lock our young men and women out of their futures, out of the happy and successful lives they could, and should, and with this initiative can now be living.

I am heartened then that in just the second month of our Presidency we managed to secure the commitment of all member states to the Youth Guarantee. It will give young people under the age of 25 the chance of training or a new job within four months of their becoming unemployed. It is clear to all of us that to tackle youth unemployment we must press ahead with adapting our education and training systems to 21st century norms, including partnerships with employers.

To boost employment and employability we have taken important decisions on cross-border mobility. Including a stronger EURES job-search facility. Presidency agreements on the expanded Erasmus-Plus programme and on professional qualifications will make an important contribution to this area. As will agreement with the Parliament on the proposal on portability of pension rights.

In all of this, and in particular to front-load funding for the Youth Guarantee, we worked with you, the Parliament.

But there was one more urgent issue. The MFF. President Schulz, Honourable Members. Our work on the MFF has underpinned so much of our Presidency endeavours and achievements. It was just last Thursday in Brussels that President Schulz and the Presidency, along with President Barroso, reached a long and eagerly-awaited agreement on the MFF.

As Parliament you vote on this agreement tomorrow. You cast your vote on a complex series of texts dealing with important technical and financial matters. You know that the

negotiations to this point were long and difficult and highly sensitive for both Council and Parliament. The result identifies the best way to ensure that the almost 1trillion euros for MFF is released as soon as possible into the real economy.

From the outset you made it clear that the priorities for the Parliament were the arrangements for Flexibility, Review/Revision, Own Resources and the Unity of the Budget. In many ways, those priorities shaped the agenda for subsequent negotiation. The Parliament's insistence on greater Flexibility in how we manage our resources was a very significant step forward and I welcome that. This will help to ensure that we get the maximum out of our budget at a time when every single euro counts.

But there were times when the Council and Parliament differed sharply. Times when it was so very difficult to make progress in the negotiations.

Times when there was frustration and disappointment on both sides. But we refused to be daunted or remain divided. We built on the trust we had nurtured, on the relationships we had developed. We didn't give up. We kept at it. And because we did, we got there.

Now the detail of what we agreed is before you. Yes we listened to the Parliament. By listening actively, I believe we managed to address the main issues of concern identified by you in your 13th of March Resolution.

As in all good negotiations, the outcome struck a balance. Not everyone in the Council was happy - something of an under-statement. But not everyone in the Parliament is 100% satisfied either!

I am happy to say today that it was the Parliament that championed many of the important measures. Not least jumpstarting Research-and-Innovation resources earlier than planned. The flexibility you introduced allows us to advance more money for youth unemployment. You worked to ensure that aid for the Most Deprived stays at current levels and is not reduced. No one institution has a monopoly of wisdom. And the Parliament has made the MFF a better instrument.

The signal that we now send to our struggling peoples, our struggling businesses and especially to our young men and women, is that yes - Europe is capable, Europe is competent, it is worthy your trust, it is deserving of our confidence. Because it can and does decide. It can and does deliver.

Today 500 million members of the European family face what are for all of us unprecedented challenges in our economy, our society. The MFF is the single, biggest investment tool we have at our disposal. We need to come together and use it forthwith.

President Schulz, Honourable Members. At the New Year I described the Parliament as our partner on our six-month Presidency journey. At the height of the Summer we can look back and say what a journey we have had. We have invested considerable time and effort in growing and tending to our relationship. From the outset we worked

intensively with you. In fact, since long before our Presidency started. The long hours of negotiations at all levels and across the full spectrum of the Union's work.

I believe that we have respected the role of this Parliament and its mandate. That respect has been a characteristic of the Irish Presidency. Equally we have done our best to represent and always faithfully the role and mandate of the Council. We have come to know each other, to become familiar with and to value each other's perspectives.

Our Minister for European Affairs is now well-known to you all. She has been a regular presence in this chamber representing the Council and listening to the diverse views of your members. Here today I thank her for her invaluable contribution.

Yes, for all of us - the Presidency, Parliament and Council - the work has been challenging. At times daunting. But individually, and especially together, we have been equal to it. Because we are strengthened and uplifted in our common cause. Our proud people and their proud and prosperous and peaceful future.

President Schulz, Honourable Members. As you know, managing a Presidency places considerable demands on any administration. This is particularly so in the case of smaller Member State such as Ireland. As my Government first came to office, we began to plan for this Presidency. We believed a country making the journey to recovery would be well placed to lead a Union committed to the same destination.

I believe we were right. Our Presidency has been good for Ireland. I hope good for our Union, and very good for our urgent agenda of Stability, Jobs and Growth.

Today I am proud to say to the Parliament that I am - as the saying goes - truly, madly, deeply, European. I believe in the idea of Europe as 'home'. And because I do, I believe as Europeans we do ourselves an injustice by failing to marvel at what we have made, and above all, what we have made together from the wreckage of war, atrocity, chaos.

Lithuania, a new and old European, will shortly assume the Presidency. I'm drawn to the words of the man who called himself "the last citizen of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania", the Nobel laureate who was perhaps best known as a Polish writer. I refer of course to Czeslaw Milosz, so beloved of our own Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney. Milosz wrote...

"Undoubtedly, I would call Europe my home. But it was a home that refused to acknowledge itself as a whole. Instead, as if on the strength of some self-imposed taboo, it classified its population into two categories... members of the family (quarrelsome but respectable) and poor relations."

Today we Europeans are what we must strive to be, very much a whole, very much one family. Our shared identity exists beyond the realm of mere economics or currency or money. It is in our literature, our music, our culture and above all our people. For we are the early generations lucky enough to be not merely 'Europeans' but European.

President Schulz, Honourable Members. In Ireland we have an old saying that a wound heals from the margins in. I hope that what we achieved at the Western margins will bring new healing and with it new hope, new prosperity to our European people, our European home. One where there is room always for God's goodness, human kindness, dignity, joy.