



European University Institute,
Florence Italy

21st JEAN MONNET LECTURE
EUROPE - THE CHALLENGES OF THE NEW
MILLENNIUM

delivered by

Her Excellency Mary McAleese
The President of the Republic of Ireland
on 9 February 1999

President, ladies and gentlemen, a ch airde,

I am delighted, for several reasons, to have been invited to deliver the annual Jean Monnet lecture today.

First and foremost, it is an honour to be associated with the distinguished European University Institute which has a richly deserved reputation throughout the European Union and beyond. Your work here in understanding and explaining Europe - in both its unity and its diversity, in both its strengths and its imperfections - is of very practical importance for the future development of the Union and for the well-being of its peoples.

It is a great honour also to follow in a line of distinguished Europeans in paying tribute to Jean Monnet, to that "prophetic soul of the wide world dreaming on things to come", if I may borrow Shakespeare's phrase. The remarkable thing about Jean Monnet is that he is not a cherished curiosity of the past but a deeply relevant beacon for the future. His message is not yesterday's half-remembered tune but the anthem of our shared tomorrow.

"Unir les hommes, regler les probl emes qui les divisent, les amener   voir leur inter et commun" is a summons to action which is both timeless and universal. That summons is as relevant today as when it was first

articulated by Jean Monnet. It is as pertinent, for example, to the aspiration of ensuring peace and stability on the wider European continent and to the aim of a permanent end to conflict on the island of Ireland, as it was to the remarkable achievement which is the European Union of today - a Union in which, to borrow Robert Schuman's phrase, war is "not merely unthinkable but materially impossible".

Patrick Pearse, the Irish leader and poet, spoke of "attempting impossible things deeming them alone worth the toil". Jean Monnet's imagination and determination made possible what must to others have seemed impossible at the time, a coming together of peoples and traditions in an unprecedented Union - a Union of which this University Institute is just one important symbol.

Finally, it is a particular pleasure for me to address you as President of Ireland, and not just because the pleasant coincidence of your own position, President Masterson, offers me the opportunity of being able to address you as one Irish President to another.

I am proud to address you today as President of a country which is a committed, experienced and enthusiastic Member State of the European Union. After more than a quarter of a century of membership, the Ireland which today looks forward to the new century with justified optimism, is more prosperous, more open, more peaceful and more self-confident than at any time in its history this millennium. We are deeply aware and appreciative, in Ireland, of the impact which Union membership has had in bringing about our economic success story of recent years and we are proud, at the same time, of the contribution which we have been able to bring to our common enterprise.

Perhaps it is appropriate that my lecture today is the 21st Jean Monnet lecture on the eve of the 21st century. 21st birthdays are associated with coming of age, with new opportunities and new responsibilities. The European Union at the threshold of a new millennium, and indeed Ireland within the Union, face such new opportunities and responsibilities. It is about those challenges that I wish to speak to you today.

Four challenges facing Europe

The European Union can be said, I think, to face four fundamental challenges in the period ahead. None of those challenges is optional. Failure to address any one of them would have very serious negative consequences for the Union and for its future development.

The first challenge facing the Union is that of equipping itself internally to maintain the basis for its success and to address effectively the concerns of its citizens. Of course, much has been achieved in that regard - including the completion of the internal market, the development of cohesion as a pillar of the Union's construction and the momentous decision to introduce a single currency. However, the challenge is an ongoing and indeed constantly shifting one and the Union's response must remain focussed and flexible.

Most immediately, in the current Agenda 2000 negotiations an agreement must be reached which provides a sound basis for the development of the Union and of its principal policies in the years ahead. The negotiations promise to be difficult since every Member State will be seeking, through the normal negotiating process, to obtain an optimal outcome. Adherence to next month's target date for agreement on a balanced package would allow the Union to turn to addressing the other important challenges which lie ahead.

It will also be important, in relation to the Union's internal development, to continue to seek to address more effectively the direct concerns of citizens in areas like employment, the environment, social exclusion and the fight against international crime. The Treaty of Amsterdam, which should enter into force in the coming months, offers a more effective basis for action in such areas. Bedding down the new single currency and effective implementation of the internal market remain significant and important tasks.

The second major challenge facing the Union, as the new century approaches, is to remain open to the wider world and to play an external role commensurate with our potential and responsibilities. If the European Union were to pursue its own closer integration without regard to the wider European continent or without a willingness to play a constructive role in

the family of nations, we would be failing not only our neighbours but ourselves.

Our most immediate responsibility is towards those of our neighbours on the European continent who have applied to join the European Union. As citizens of the European Union, we ourselves may have a tendency to see the more negative aspects of the process of integration. The bargaining and the huxtering, the jargon and the bureaucracy may on occasion seem a far cry from the vision of Jean Monnet. If, however, such a disposition towards self-criticism is essential for the long-term well-being of any institution, it is salutary to remind ourselves, from time to time, that the Union is increasingly recognised by its neighbours and indeed further afield as a source of political, economic and now monetary stability in a world in which such stability is a precious and all too often precarious commodity.

The European Union is not an exclusive club. Frankly, if it had been when Ireland applied to join, we would possibly still be waiting at the door. The door is open and must remain open to our democratic European neighbours as and when they are ready to join. The further enlargement which faces the Union in the years ahead is the most significant thus far. It will be on a scale which might have seemed fanciful even to Jean Monnet. However, the difficulty of the challenge is exceeded by the magnitude of the opportunity. It is an enlargement which will be measured by geography but judged by history.

Of course, the Union's external responsibility is by no means limited to those who have applied to join our common enterprise or indeed to the European continent. If the Union is not an exclusive club, neither must it be an introverted one - obsessed with its own rules and regulations.

In an increasingly interdependent world, the European Union is uniquely well placed not only to pursue its essential interests but also to further its fundamental values and to assist those in greatest need. In a world increasingly twisted by distrust and fear, and pockmarked by violence and injustice, the Union can give humble witness to the simple reality that - even on the most trodden battleground in history - there is a better way.

The third great challenge is that of increasing popular understanding of the European Union - what it is, how it operates, the choices which it faces. The challenge is to win the acceptance of those who are sceptical, the interest of those who are indifferent, the allegiance of the citizens whose interests the Union is designed to serve.

It is a question of public support, not a question of public relations. It is the fundamental task of ensuring and explaining relevance, not the superficial sport of spin-doctoring. Politicians and public servants, the media and the educational system at all levels must play their part. It is the challenge of analysing, understanding and explaining Europe, a task in relation to which the European University Institute plays an important and positive role.

The Union has already seen a significant positive shift in recent years towards recognising the need to address - and to be seen to address - the concerns of citizens. I have already mentioned the enhanced priority which the Treaty of Amsterdam accords to some of the most direct public concerns in areas such as employment and the fight against crime. It will be important to use those new provisions effectively when the Treaty enters into force in the coming months.

Moreover, there is a growing recognition, also reflected in the Treaty of Amsterdam, of the importance of ensuring that the Union functions more transparently, that the democratic contribution of the European Parliament is strengthened, that the democratic role of national parliaments is facilitated and that the principle of subsidiarity is applied in a balanced way.

The relevance of Europe is, of course, not something which should be seen through the prism of decisions taken in Brussels. It should be seen through the eyes of those people who benefit in a very practical way from the European project - the students who have the opportunity to study in other Member States, the women who have benefited from the equality provisions embodied in Community law, the workers whose jobs depend on the internal market in one way or another.

However, if much has been achieved in terms of bringing the Union closer to the citizens to whom it belongs, much also remains to be accomplished in the years ahead.

The fourth and last challenge facing the Union which I would like to highlight briefly today is the challenge of weaving for Europe the necessary subtle blend of flexibility and coherence at the outset of a new millennium.

Flexibility is an increasingly important principle in the development of the European Union. In an expanding and increasingly diverse Union, the straitjacket of uniformity is no longer an option. Whether as a result of different stages of development, of diverse popular priorities or of objectively dissimilar situations, flexibility - especially in terms of timing - has become of increasing relevance in a number of policy areas. The single currency and the area of justice and home affairs are just two of the principal examples. The Treaty of Amsterdam will also introduce cautious general flexibility provisions as well as adaptations to the decision-making procedures in a number of areas to facilitate the taking of decisions.

However, if the new approach to flexibility has been a cautious one it is because flexibility, if misjudged or misused, could undermine the very nature of the European Union. Unless flexibility is combined with preservation of the necessary coherence, with a respect for strong common rules, and with a shared commitment to closer integration, we risk being Scott Fitzgerald's "boats against the current carried back ceaselessly into the past".

Four principal means for addressing those challenges

Ladies and gentlemen,

If the challenges facing the European Union are daunting, the means which Jean Monnet has left at our disposal for addressing those challenges are also formidable. I will mention briefly four of the tools which remain at our disposal, in good working order and reasonably well-oiled, on the eve of a new era.

First, we have the Treaties on which the European Union is founded. It is, of course, easy to take them for granted. It is easy to deride their complexity. They certainly need streamlining from time to time.

But built on the foundation of their seemingly legalistic and arcane language is the most remarkable Union of free democratic countries and peoples that the world has known. Built on the balance of the Treaties is an emerging Common Foreign and Security Policy through which fifteen countries - with different and sometimes conflicting histories, perceptions and interests - increasingly speak with one voice on the basis of their shared values. Built on the complexity and imperfection of the Treaties is the largest single market in the world, a remarkable single currency, and a nexus of legislation and policies which accomplish the hugely complex task of addressing satisfactorily the diverse interests of our employers and workers, of our industry and agriculture, of our more prosperous and less developed regions.

The Union's institutions, probably the most original and important cornerstone of the edifice, represent the second important instrument at our disposal. "Rien n'est possible sans les hommes, rien n'est durable sans les institutions" -nobody would be more pleased than Jean Monnet that yesterday's leap of his imagination has become the truism of today. Of course, the institutions are imperfect but Monnet rightly recognised that, as he put it, one cannot make progress without a certain disorder.

The value of the institutions consists not just in their existence, with their distinctive and important roles, but also in their subtle ways of functioning which have grown up over the years. The civilisation of European decision-making, like any civilisation, does not change human nature but provides a creative channel for it.

Of course, like everything else, the institutions need to keep pace with changing times and challenges. But their essential nature and balances must be preserved. Those who would undo the work of Jean Monnet, can do so more effectively by undermining his means than by questioning his ends. It is vital that the innards of the Union are not devoured by the cancer of cynicism and are revitalised by credible diagnosis and remedial action.

The third important means in the armoury of the European Union at the start of the 21st century is the reality of our shared interests. The Union is founded not on the quest for a nebulous Holy Grail, but on the pursuit of real national interests - interests defined, as they should be, in a wide and long-term perspective. The Union is based not on an abandonment of

sovereignty but on an effective exercise of it. The Union involves, as this University Institute amply testifies, not a withering but an enriching of national identity.

I can think of no better example of this than Ireland. When we first joined the Union – then the EEC – back in the early 1970's, many people feared that we had effectively sold our soul for economic gain. These cultural Jeremiahs predicted that our very rich and distinctive Irish culture would inevitably dissolve within a Euro melting pot of larger nations.

Paradoxically, our membership of the European Union has had the very opposite effect. Never before have we been so culturally confident, never before have we taken such pride in our distinctive traditions and heritage. What those voices of doom had not understood, is that at the very heart of the European Union, is the concept of a communion of equals. Our fears had been grounded in our historical experience of international relations which had been governed by an ethic of predator and prey; where the small and the weak were dominated by the large and the powerful; and where cultural diversity was seen as a threat to the powerful core.

That experience inflicted a deep wound on our psyche. It meant that when we finally gained independence, we embarked on a course of self-imposed isolation, convinced that only this could save us from cultural annihilation. All outside forces were seen as threats, because they represented the strange and unknown and the potentially hostile.

The collegiate nature of the European Union provided a new model for international relations – a model based on mutual respect, regardless of size and on co-operation rather than coercion. It demonstrated that far from threatening our own identity, a willingness to open up and engage with others could enhance it. Europe provided us with a showcase in which our cultural wealth could be displayed. We found, to our surprise, that we were admired by others for the very diversity that we had thought a disadvantage. Their admiration reflected back to us the value of what we possess, and helped us, also, to realise this value for ourselves.

Almost 90 years ago, Tom Kettle, an Irish journalist, poet, lawyer and Professor of Economics, who fought and died on the Somme, had already

realised this potential. Speaking in 1910, he said "if this generation has, for its first task, the recovery of the old Ireland, it has, for its second, the discovery of the new Europe. ...My only counsel to Ireland is that in order to become deeply Irish, she must become European". It was a remarkably prescient and accurate comment. In fact, through our membership of the European Union, we didn't simply discover Europe – we re-discovered it. We rediscovered the footsteps that our ancestors had trodden in the last millennium, when Irish monks established monasteries all over Europe. We started to embrace strangers, and re-discovered them as old friends. We found out that to be small, to have never been the aggressor, to have stood on the sidelines when the battlelines of the two World Wars were being drawn – that isolation which had once been a disadvantage - now meant that we could be a friend to all and respected in our own right.

Of course it is not always plain-sailing. The Union is perhaps somewhat akin to a family. In the midst of the regular bickering, the family members may for a moment lose sight of what they have in common. In the course of the normal posturing and positioning, family life may on occasion seem to be more about confrontation than co-operation. But when the dust settles, what binds is more important than what divides. Each of the members of our European "family" knows full well, through the haze of healthy disagreement, the ephemeral importance of winning the argument of the hour - not, I hasten to add, that any of the family members will ever concede a single inch until they have to.

The fourth and last strength of the Union to which I would like to refer today is its way of doing business. The prevalent instinct in the Union is still to find compromises with which everyone can live, to accommodate rather than to isolate, to cajole rather than to steamroll. It is an ethos which should not be taken for granted, in a world where "might" is so often "right".

It is a formula based on decency and tolerance, a very different model to that which prevailed in the past. That old formula was grounded in a win-lose ethic, where there could only be triumphalistic winners and bitter losers – losers who shored up their humiliation and planned their revenge, in an endless cycle of antagonism.

The lesson that Europe learned was a hard one, but one which laid the basis for a new ethic which forms a sacred tabernacle at the heart of Europe. We learned that to destroy a country is not to destroy the hatred in the hearts of men and women that will eventually lead to new wars. We finally realised that a future could not be built on the win-lose formula of the past. We distilled these lessons into a new way of looking at the world. We created a new ethical framework based on partnership and mutual respect; where differences could be ironed out by dialogue rather than destruction; and where sovereignty, dignity and equality are entitlements as of right, and not by virtue of power or size.

These principles may now seem self-evident to us, but we should never treat them with complacency or allow them to be eroded, for we are surrounded, even on our own doorstep, by examples where they do not prevail. The European Union is testament to the fact that this model can and does work – that even, or perhaps especially, where there is a history of great bitterness and mutual destruction between nations, it is both possible and necessary to find a new way.

1998 was the 50th anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, under which all individuals are entitled as their birthright – regardless of race, creed or culture – to respect and dignity. For so many people throughout the world, these rights remain an aspiration rather than reality. Yet it need not be the case. The European Union provides a perfect example of how those values can be realised at institutional level, grounded in a value system which is not flawed in its conception even if it sometimes falls short in practice.

One of the continuing problems with the vindication of human rights, of course, is the very different way in which rights are perceived in different cultures. To some, the UN Declaration is a product of the Western mind, very far removed from their own experience and world-view. If these rights are to transcend accusations of ethno-centricity, they need to be supported by, and grounded in, an ethical base which is genuinely global, which finds resonance in the villages of Asia and the shanty-towns of Africa as well as the skyscrapers of Europe.

The challenge of formulating such an ethic – a set of guidelines for human behaviour which can be accepted universally – may seem both impossible and irrelevant to the goals of the EU. In fact, neither is the case.

It is not impossible to find such an ethic, for the building blocks already exist. One factor common to all cultures is the influence which religion has had on the development of their value systems. True, these religions are very different in terms of dogma, ritual and rites and we are all only too aware of the tragic conflicts that can arise between their adherents in the name of religion. Yet at the core of each - Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Native Religions and many more – is a common set of values, including the Golden rule, familiar to each of us – "we must treat others as we wish others to treat us". This basic premise can be the source of a global ethic, which, in the words of theologian Hans Küng, "is a fundamental consensus concerning binding values, irrevocable standards and personal attitudes". Such an ethic, although it springs from a religious core, is not confined to any one religion and can be endorsed by those of faith and non-believers alike.

Hans Küng has expressed the hope that "perhaps one day there may even be a UN Declaration on a Global Ethic, to provide moral support to the Declaration on Human Rights, which is so often ignored and cruelly violated." If this hope is to be realised, leadership is required – leadership by all nations and institutions that have at their core a commitment to justice, equality, mutual respect and tolerance.

This is where the European Union comes in. For these are the values that lie at the heart of the European ideal. They confer on us both a right and a responsibility to provide leadership in seeking to extend the areas of the world in which these values can become a reality.

Northern Ireland peace process

This need not be a pipedream. These values on which the European Union is founded – which find expression in respect for diversity and the peaceful resolution of conflict - have already had a tangible effect in one of the most beautiful but troubled parts of Europe. I am referring, of course, to the peace process in Northern Ireland.

The contribution of the European Union to that process has involved many dimensions. The financial assistance from our European partners has been generous and effective. The new institutional structures owe much to the now tried and tested methods of the European Union. The language of partnership and the ethos of accommodation have drawn on our shared experience in Europe. Above all, the European Union, through its ethical and moral leadership, has provided an important part of the context for the resolution of difference and the expression of identity, so that people can start looking forward to the future with hope.

There is one final lesson that Northern Ireland can still learn from Europe. The atrocities of two world wars may have been the stimulus that provoked the creation of the European Union. That stimulus, the memory of those horrors, was enough to sustain the architects of today's peaceful Europe through the long, slow, painful process of building that peace. It took years to build up the democratic framework through which partnership could take root in Europe, even longer to eradicate the bitterness in the hearts of people. Yet there were enough men and women of belief and commitment to sustain hope through the inevitable difficulties and setbacks that arose.

All too often in Northern Ireland, it seems that hope is too fragile a plant to survive the inevitable ill-winds that blow from time to time. All too often, it seems that when things start to fall apart, people retreat back into their bunkers. All too often, it seems to require the sickening tragedy of a horror like Omagh to reawaken the latent decency in people, to shake them back out of their bunkers, to renew their determination to move forward. Could we finally agree to move beyond the need for the momentum of the last atrocity to keep this process on the rails? Let us find that momentum to keep moving forward within ourselves, simply because it is the right thing to do. Let us learn from Europe that the goal of peace should be sufficient unto itself, it should not require a constant flow of blood in order to keep the process alive.

The new millennium

The advent of the millennium offers an occasion to all of us - whether in Ireland or Brussels or Florence - to reflect on what has gone before, to take stock of where we stand, and to make certain resolutions about our future.

Let us remember that while much of the current fever about the millennium is concentrated on just one day – the 31st December 1999 - we would do well to reflect on the words of Thomas Mann. "Time", he wrote, "has no divisions to mark its passage. When a new century begins, it is only we mortals who ring bells and fire off pistols".

The start of a new millennium is just a punctuation mark in the story of our times. It underlines but does not alter the fundamental challenges with which we are grappling in Europe. It highlights the opportunities which beckon, but leaves it to us to deliver on them ourselves - through our Treaties, through our institutions, through our shared vision, through our way of doing business.

The millennium day itself does no more than offer us, on the "whirly-gig of time", an important moment to reflect on how far we have come in Europe, to reassess where we are today and to reaffirm the manner in which we wish to move forward together. What matters far more is the long-term vision we formulate for the decades, even the centuries that lie ahead. It is an almost impossibly long time-frame, but for that very reason, it provides us with an opportunity to formulate a vision for the future, a vision which can be radically different from the present. We cannot change the past but we can redeem it by using the present well to create the kind of future we can be proud of.

The Europe we have today grew from a vision of the impossible which a few courageous men and women had the courage to imagine. Let us never become so caught up in the realpolitik of conflicting national self-interests, that we forget that ethic of partnership, consensus and decency which has made our peace and prosperity possible. Let us remember also, the need to constantly renew that vision of what might be, and to make it a reality for others.

Throughout the millennia, the one constant in a world of change, has been the scourge of poverty. How many lives have been skewed by it, blighted by it? How many more will be? We in Europe now have the tools and the

ethical framework to be the generation that tackles poverty for real, within our own boundaries and outside them. It is not a problem that can be solved overnight. It is not a project that lends itself to the once off millennium projects that are to be completed by January 2000. But if we have the courage to imagine what might be and the will to take the first steps towards making that vision a reality, nothing is impossible. If we have the commitment, we can script a different future for millions of our brothers and sisters. We can give them the gift of a new life lived decently, lived with dignity. Let us make this project of creating a more just and equal world, part of our vision for the next millennium.