

Guest Editorial

DICK SPRING

On 1 July last, Ireland assumed the six-month rotating Presidency of the European Union. We followed Italy and will be followed by the Netherlands on 1 January 1997.

This is Ireland's fifth Presidency. We have, as a result, a considerable body of experience and expertise within the Irish administration to draw on. However, all Presidencies rely greatly on the expertise and advice of the Council General Secretariat. The Council Secretariat provides invaluable continuity and consistency to the changing personnel of the rotating Presidency and its advice and support is very valuable.

One of the keys to a successful Presidency is to concentrate on the job at hand and to remain as flexible as possible. The ability to ensure good day to day management is necessary. In addition, an ability to take decisions swiftly and take into account ever changing circumstances is crucial.

During the Irish Presidency there will be approximately forty Council meetings, two European Council meetings and a host of ancillary meetings both in and outside the EU. There will be a range of Presidency responsibilities in relation to the European Parliament and other EU institutions. The Presidency has to chair and direct over 2,000 Council working group meetings at official level. All these meetings have to be prepared, organized, analysed and followed up. For small Member States within the EU the ability to find sufficiently qualified personnel to handle the demands posed by the Presidency can be difficult. In Ireland, we have drawn on the resources of a broad sector of government departments, deployed our personnel from a range of embassies to key missions and utilized the services of retired ambassadors.

A key part of the preparatory process was the identification of themes and issues which were likely to come to maturity during our Presidency. In the months immediately preceding the Presidency these were distilled into six broad priorities. On the internal agenda of the European Union the Irish Presidency has emphasized the need to ensure progress on employment, justice and home affairs (including policy on drugs), economic and monetary union and the IGC. On the external relations agenda of the European Union

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we have emphasized the need to continue the development of this important area and in particular continue the ongoing constructive engagement with potential members of the European Union.

For our purposes here I propose to concentrate on the main priorities of the Irish Presidency in the area of external relations outlining what these are and the direction in which we hope to move.

I External Relations

It would not be appropriate here to list the full range of issues on the external relations agenda with which the current Presidency must engage. Rather, what follows is a snapshot of the main issues for the European Union in the next six months.

1. Enlargement

There is no doubt that the proposed enlargement of the Union lies beyond many of the European Union's actions today. Enlargement is both a political necessity and a historic opportunity. The ongoing process of developing the Union's relations with the twelve applicant countries is an important priority for the European Union and for the Presidency. Ministerial and other-level contacts have been ongoing throughout our Presidency and the presence of the Heads of State or Government of the Twelve at the Dublin European Council in December will be a particular highlight of that meeting. In addition, the efficient management and development of the day to day aspects of the Union's relations with the applicant countries is of particular importance and the product of this relationship is being monitored closely, not just by the Presidency, but also by our partners and the applicant states.

2. Former Yugoslavia

The democratic revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War brought about an improvement in the international security situation, in particular, for Europe. But the crisis in Former Yugoslavia graphically underlines that ethnic conflicts and territorial disputes can arise which are far beyond the capacity of individual states to deal with effectively.

In the period leading up to the Irish Presidency of the EU we had seen dramatic developments in the peace process. The Dayton Peace Agreement laid the foundation for lasting peace and stability in that area and in Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular. The Agreement, and that on Eastern Slavonia in

Croatia, gave rise to optimism that four years of conflict and suffering had given way to an era of hope and reconciliation.

But the international community was faced with new challenges generated by this process. Assisting the parties in implementing the Agreements has been a major undertaking and a priority for the EU throughout 1996.

Strong support must continue to be given to the structures which have been put in place to implement the Agreements, in particular the Office of the High Representative, Mr Carl Bildt, which has been striving hard to build confidence among the parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina and elsewhere.

Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina were always seen as a cornerstone of the peace process. Much of the effort of the international community, and the EU, has been aimed at ensuring that elections were effective, as well as in planning for the establishment of the state institutions envisaged under the new Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The effort in this area is ongoing and is likely to require the involvement of the international community for some time to come, as will also be the case in a number of other areas including the promotion of human rights, the return of refugees and displaced persons and economic reconstruction and reform.

While the conflict in former Yugoslavia has ended, lasting peace must still be consolidated. Ireland, both nationally and as EU Presidency, is continuing to work closely with its EU partners, and with the larger international community, to sustain and develop the peace process.

3. Middle East

The EU has a long and deep involvement in the Middle East and a strong commitment to the search for a just, lasting and comprehensive peace.

At the European Council at Florence in June, the Union reiterated its commitment to the essential principles of the Peace Process, including land for peace and self-determination for the Palestinians, with all that it entails.

The Union has an important political role to play in the region to complement its position as the largest economic contributor. The Union's policy is based on consistent adherence to the principles underlying the peace process and on maintaining a balance between the interests of all the parties to the peace process.

The challenge now before the Union and the international community is to restore momentum and impetus to the peace process. Delays in resuming negotiations can only serve to undermine the prospects of peace, security and prosperity for all the parties. Ireland, as Presidency, along with our partners in the Union, has taken the opportunity during recent high-level contacts with the parties in the region to urge them to re-engage fully in the peace process and to offer support in the search for peace.

4. Euro–Mediterranean Partnership

Ireland is committed to furthering the implement of the political, economic and social goals of the Euro–Mediterranean Partnership established in the Barcelona Declaration in November. This partnership offers an important opportunity for a wide-ranging dialogue between the European Union and the countries of the Mediterranean designed to enhance the prosperity and stability of the region. The adoption of the Meda Regulation by the General Affairs Council in July will allow the goals of the Partnership to be advanced considerably.

5. EU–US Relations

Relations between the European Union and the USA, founded on shared values and common interests, are of crucial importance to both partners. Our partnership is also global in form and dynamic and evolutionary in nature. We have a responsibility to work closely together in the international community in order to ensure effective responses to the increasingly complex array of global challenges confronting us on the eve of the twenty-first century.

Against this background, the EU and the USA adopted last December in Madrid the New Transatlantic Agenda (NTA) which is based on a framework for action with four major goals. The NTA commits both sides to coordinate their efforts in order to:

- promote peace and stability, democracy and development around the world;
- respond to global challenges;
- contribute to the expansion of world trade and closer economic relations;
- enhance people-to-people links across the Atlantic.

The Action Plan which accompanies the NTA is of unprecedented scope and contains detailed objectives which both sides have agreed to achieve. The EU, represented by the Presidency and the European Commission, is committed to working actively with the USA to advance the Action Plan's implementation. We will work closely with the USA to strengthen the multilateral trading system and ensure a successful outcome to the first WTO Ministerial Conference in Singapore in December.

It is not uncommon for partners – even close partners like the USA and the EU – to have different views on how to achieve agreed objectives. Differences currently exist between our two sides in relation to the means of promoting democratization and economic reform in Cuba and in combating

international terrorism. The EU has expressed in its serious concern about the extraterritorial aspects of recent US legislation in these areas. We do not, however, differ on the fundamentals. Like the USA, the EU is anxious to progress the cause of democratization, human rights and economic reform in Cuba. Like the USA, the EU totally rejects the use of terrorism by any group and is determined to combat the evil of international terrorism whatever its source or motive.

The transatlantic partnership and the goals which both sides have in common clearly transcend present differences. We must continue to use every opportunity to ensure that these differences are resolved by close and open dialogue.

6. Africa

It is a priority of the Irish Presidency to support efforts towards the resolution of conflict in the Great Lakes Region and to work closely with the EU's Special Envoy to the region, Mr Aldo Ajello. Recent events in Burundi have made that country a matter of great international concern as it has grave implications for the stability of the countries of the region. It threatens to undermine the progress being made in other priority areas of the Irish Presidency, such as the rehabilitation of neighbouring Rwanda and efforts towards the earliest possible resolution of the refugee issue, based on the principle of voluntary repatriation. Along with its partners in the European Union, the Irish Presidency will continue to convey the very clear message of the international community that there must be an end to all violence and an early commencement of unconditional, all-inclusive national dialogue in Burundi.

The Irish Presidency has also been seeking to advance the ongoing dialogue between the EU and the Organization of African Unity aimed at the establishment of Preventive Diplomacy and Conflict Prevention and Resolution mechanisms in Africa.

The recent Ministerial Conference of the European Union and the Southern African Development Community in Windhoek, Namibia, marked a further stage in the substantive dialogue and practical cooperation between the two organizations which began in Berlin in 1994.

The Presidency is also continuing to press, with partners and in cooperation with other countries and organizations, for the earliest possible transition to democracy and full respect for human rights and the rule of law in Nigeria and elsewhere. It is also seeking to consolidate the fragile peace process in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone and to prevent the flow of illegal arms to areas of conflict in Africa.

II Conclusion

A recurrent theme throughout all of our priorities is that of a changing and evolving Europe. Ireland's Presidency will play a part in its six-month term in defining the new Europe of the next century. None the less, no Presidency acts in isolation. The success of our Presidency will be due to the cooperation of all Member States. Our agenda was not of our own creation. However, we will leave our mark. These six months will have a particularly Irish imprint, one which we hope will be a model for Presidencies to come.