

OPENING ADDRESS BY THE HON. TONIO BORG, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ENTITLED 'EUROPE AFTER IRELAND – WHAT NEXT?' – 9TH OCTOBER 2009 – ST. JULIAN'S

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to address you today at such an important juncture for the European Union. I am well aware of the historical weight of the moment and of the responsibility that we share at this point in time.

The Irish people have spoken. The people have categorically accepted the Lisbon Treaty a mere 18 months after a devastating rejection that plunged the European Union into a crisis of conscience. What does this result tell us? What does it say about the new Europe that is emerging? It is my intention, ladies and gentlemen, to take a few minutes of your time to look at the democratic process that we have just witnessed, the lessons learnt out of this experience, which in hindsight will have proven to be of immense benefit to the European project.

Democracy is a living concept and the Irish referendum last week is probably the best example of this. It is a fine example of a Europe in motion – one that has managed to ride the wave of discontent that emerged with the European Constitution and then the Lisbon Treaty and moved toward a compromise that embraced the concerns of the Irish people. In effect, the Irish people can be seen to be as representatives of Europeans across the spectrum. Through the Irish referendum, the people of Europe have spoken. First through a No vote and now with a Yes vote. The Irish have told Europe to listen to their concerns, and Europe has listened. The Irish have asked for more safeguards and Europe has delivered. What now?

If we were to put aside the issue still hanging over the Lisbon Treaty's head which are the verdicts yet to come from the Czech Republic and Poland, there is much that comes out of the Irish YES and the process that led to it.

To begin with the European Union communicated. The Irish Government and the European Union, especially the Commission, wanted the people to realize that the EU stretches far beyond the corridors of power in Brussels. Decisions taken in the Belgian capital have little relevance if not translated to the man in the street. The European project cannot be realized unless the European people are brought on board and the only way to do this is to communicate. The active word here is 'communication'. Often considered an art, communication throughout this second run of the Irish referendum has been paramount. The information that was available to the Irish people was not only abundant, but also clear and easy to digest. The case for Europe was laid out in layman's language ensuring that all Irish are convinced of the validity of the European Union and Ireland's position at its heart. And here lies lesson one – communication.

The second lesson that emerges from the Irish YES is the engagement with civil society. This time round the YES campaign was more united and organized with all Irish political parties except for Sinn Fein, in favour of the Treaty. The parties, together with civil society in general, be it the industrialists, the trade unions, NGOs and farming community engaged with the Irish Government and with the European Union in order to clear the quagmire that was the Treaty of Lisbon during the first referendum. In an unprecedented way, Irish civil society engaged the EU on matters that affected their daily lives, questioned and proposed, in a way that animated the process toward a YES as never before across Europe. The EU has learnt that engaging with the people and with civil society produces results and builds a stronger and more robust union that is truly a representative of the people, not just in name but in practice.

Engagement is exactly what MEUSAC was set up for – a forum that engaged with civil society in the run up to our referendum on the EU and which has now assumed the role of 'communicator' with civil society and the people of Malta on matters related to the EU. Only through such fora can we assure that what we decide in Brussels is not alien but is actually understood. MEUSAC is and should remain an important tool for the Maltese Government to translate EU jargon into palatable every day language in order to ensure that the Maltese form part of, and participate in, the creation of a new

Europe post-Lisbon. On the flip-side to this, Maltese civil society is being called upon to engage with the EU in order to ensure that its message gets to the grassroots. Every level of society should be able to question the Union and Malta's place within it. Only then can we boast of a citizen's Europe.

The third lesson to be learned is solidarity. The European project is all about solidarity and it is this value that has emerged so strongly this time round. If we look back at the NO vote and Europe's reaction to it, we immediately realize that although the Irish NO sent shock waves across Europe and through the European institutions, the EU President at the time, President Sarkozy, was categorical when saying that Europe accepted the Irish people's democratic right to a NO. He also added that he would, as President of the Council engage with the Irish Government as well as with the other Member States in order to seek a solution to the impasse. The French President acknowledged the needs and concerns of the Irish and addressed them. He listened and understood and worked towards a solution in solidarity with the Irish people. This proved to be the winning ticket in securing a positive outcome for the Lisbon Treaty – a strategy which, I have no doubt, is being implemented with the Czechs and the Poles. We must acknowledge the fact that the EU is a Union based on solidarity and any decision we take should reflect this. Only such an ethic, albeit tedious at times, will ensure a strong and united Union that reflects the dreams of its founding fathers.

Malta was amongst the first to thwart attempts, following the Irish rejection, of pushing Europe forward and leaving Ireland behind. The Irish played by the rules, and Malta would have been the last to criticise a Member State for using the unanimity rule – irrespective of whether we agreed with the Irish rejection.

A Europe closer to the people and for the people is exactly what these same founding fathers envisioned. Only this way can Europe put its war-torn past behind it and concentrate on building a prosperous future. Indeed, the citizen lies at the heart of the Lisbon Treaty in a way that supersedes all previous treaties.

To begin with, the Treaty ensures that the EU can be more effective and accountable in its agenda ensuring concrete results for the citizens of Europe. A Europe of 27 and more can now look forward to more efficient decision-making procedures that work within the principle of subsidiarity and not merely pay lip service to it.

Effective, in that the EU can now move away from institutional reform and concentrate on issues which matter to the European citizen such as energy security, organized crime and terrorism, globalization and further enlargement making it a stronger force within the international political scene. This is further strengthened by the full-time position of President of the European Council, ensuring political direction and continuity like never before.

Accountable, in that not only will the European Parliament be given a stronger role in decision-making of the Union but a new-found role for national parliaments has been carved out. This is a first in the Treaty, and good news for the citizens of Europe. Parliaments now have a direct voice in making European laws for the first time. The mechanisms created under Lisbon will ensure that national parliaments engage actively with the European Union as well as with other national parliaments in the interest of the European citizen. Our parliament that has, since our entry into the EU, actively sought to keep track of EU legislation, will now assume a direct role not only in national legislation but also in legislation on a European level. This will give our parliamentarians the opportunities to grow within Europe and climb out of the restrictions of national issues to adopt a European dimension. With this new dimension to the EU, democracy has been strengthened and will definitely over time make the Union stronger and more robust.

The Maltese Government will certainly beef up the structures which will ensure that our parliament is engaged with the European project, and has a direct voice in Europe. It is our duty, as Government to ensure that the principle of subsidiarity, a corner stone of the European Union, is put into practice.

Finally, this Treaty is citizen-focused. Not only has the European Parliament been strengthened and national parliaments been given a role, but the European citizen can, under Lisbon have a direct effect on European legislation. For the first time European citizens can ask the EU to act through the

Citizens initiative. Under the Treaty one million European citizens can petition the European Commission for a change in policy, which could ultimately lead to new legislation.

This, together with the incorporation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights into EU law, revolutionised the face of Europe making it a Europe of the people and for the people. In ensuring these safeguards, the EU is ensuring that all European legislation is within the parameters of the Charter of Human Rights, whilst at the same time not impinging on the powers of the national courts of law.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, What does this Treaty mean for Malta? Malta, as the smallest member of the EU, will benefit in no small part from this Treaty. To begin with the idea of equality at the European table has been reinforced with the retention of a Maltese Commissioner. Although we do recognize the weight and responsibility of the larger Member States, we do not believe in a multispeed Europe and feel that on issues of disagreement and preservation of national interest a consensus must and can be sought. Europe has been created for all its member countries and no European country should be allowed to remain behind to create a two-tier Union. Having said this, impasses arising out of difficulties in reaching a unanimous decision, especially on issues of foreign policy, should be avoided. When it comes to the EU's international standing, impressions are paramount. The High Representative's role will surely have a positive effect on the way the world looks at the EU. Only when speaking with one voice, when it matters most, can the EU claim its place as an effective player on the international stage.

The EU needs to be consistent and coherent when it comes to foreign policy matters, and active in real time, rather than the pace we have been used to. Under Lisbon we can get on with it. We will no longer be bogged down by the institutional side to things. If we put our minds to it, we can truly create a respectable force that can be a positive force in the world.

For Malta, this increased clout can only be of benefit with our voice in reality being larger than our size.

Our size under the Lisbon Treaty, has not been disadvantaged. On the contrary the attainment of the 6th seat has given Malta more representation ensuring that our MEPs can work within a larger number of select committees thus enabling our voice to be heard across a wider spectrum of issues.

Finally, on a lighter note the Lisbon Treaty also makes it possible for Member States to actually withdraw from the Union, previously uncharted waters. Hoping Malta will never have to make use of this clause, it is a clear indication as to the extent to which this new Treaty has gone to ensure the ultimate goal of preserving national interests at the heart of this unique and complex European project.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, We have looked at the profound changes that a YES vote in Ireland has brought to our Union. We all agree that it is a moment of celebration for the whole of Europe. Let us not get carried away. Much is yet to be done. The Czechs and the Poles need to be listened to and understood. The rest of Europe needs to work hard in order to maintain the momentum created by the Irish YES and ensure that communication and solidarity are not just buzz words put into practice when a crisis arises, but they are really and truly representative of a Europe close to its people.

As in a referendum, we politicians are subject to the same democratic rules. It is the people who elect us and it is the people that keep us here. With this in mind it is our duty to ensure that what we decide and what we embark upon has the approval of the people as ultimately it is they to whom the European project belongs.

Thank you.

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