

Welcome. Delighted to host this event for **3 reasons**.

First and foremost, the Embassy is delighted to be associated with Trinity College and in particular with its Grattan Lecture Series. This evening's event is the first in the Series to take place outside of Ireland. No more fitting place than in the capital of Ireland's closest neighbour; and no more fitting time than when Ireland holds the EU Presidency for the 7th time.

Second, I am delighted to welcome to the Embassy such a distinguished panel: Pat Cox former President of the European Parliament; Professor Antoin Murphy – Associate Professor of Economics at Trinity College; and a longstanding and close friend of the Embassy Charles Grant head of the Centre for European Reform. If I may, I would like to thank also our good friend Hamish McRae for making the initial contact with the Embassy suggesting tonight's event.

And the 3rd reason I'm delighted to host this evening's event is that the theme of tonight's discussions, **British and Irish relations in a Changing EU**, is important, topical and – having spent 22 years dealing with EU negotiations, close to my heart.

It goes without saying that the views of the panellists this evening will be their own rather than those of the Embassy. But it is a pleasure and an honour for us to be able provide the setting for what I'm sure will be a stimulating, vibrant, topical and open debate: the type of debate which Europe needs and which, contrary to popular misconception, is increasingly taking place around the EU.

Given my lengthy relationship with tonight's theme, you will forgive me if at the outset I take my favourite hobby-horse for a quick canter around the track. Let me offer **5 brief reflections** :

First, the British/Irish relationship is closer today than ever before. The closeness of our geography has become more important than the divisions of our history. And nothing has made a greater contribution in that regard than our shared membership of the EU over 40 years. It has been important and positive not just for our two countries individually but for the relationship between us.

Politically, our shared membership of the EU has quite literally brought our politicians and officials together day after day over four decades. It has given us deep common interests like never before and a structured context for pursuing those interests as well as for resolving differences where they arise.

Psychologically, the EU has placed us on a more equal footing as nations than at any time in our history. Access for Ireland to significant influence in a world beyond our nearest neighbour has been good for our relationship with our nearest neighbour.

Economically, the massively positive impact which EU membership has had on our economy has at the same time made us a more important negotiating and trading partner for Britain.

And, on a personal level, Irish and British negotiators have come to realise over the years that although - as with every Member State - we agree on some issues and disagree on others - we share culturally a way of approaching issues and a way of doing business.

Second, public debate about EU in our two countries is quite different. Debate about the EU in Ireland has, over many years now, been deeper and more widespread, not least because of our frequent referenda. If you don't believe me, ask your next Dublin taxi driver to give you an analysis of bond spreads. I hope I'm not generalising too much from my extensive personal vox pop of London taxi drivers if I suggest that they may be more likely to offer widespread misconceptions such as that Britain has little influence in Europe; that the Euro-zone is a basket case; that establishing *a priori* immovable red lines is an effective method of negotiation; and that the UK has captured the majority public mood across Europe.

The subject matter of EU debate in Ireland, as in most Member States, is also somewhat different from here. In London, EU debates often seem to me like permanent marriage guidance counselling sessions about Britain's relationship with Europe whereas in Dublin and other capitals people have perhaps moved on to discuss where to live and where to send the children to school. Public debate here sometimes focuses more on national angst than on national interests. Sometimes it seems to focus less on winning the game in hand than on how to invent a different game which the other players don't want to play.

Third, as regards specific EU issues there are perhaps more issues on which Britain and Ireland agree than on which we disagree. But we have never been in a British camp in the EU or indeed in any camp. We are certainly not in a British camp today. Apart from disagreeing with the UK, as we do with every MS, on certain important issues, we are also - for the moment - set on quite different courses in Europe. The closeness of our bilateral relationship is exceptional and irreversible. But the only area where we have drifted somewhat apart, risk drifting even further apart, is as regards the nature of our membership of the EU. This is, needless to say, not inevitable and the leaders of the three main British parties continue to make clear that they remain deeply committed to Britain's ongoing and influential membership of the EU.

Fourth, Ireland has in a sense made its fundamental choice in Europe. We are, I think, comfortable in our choice of committed engaged membership of the EU and the Euro. We are naturally concerned about the course that Britain will choose, but, perhaps surprisingly, soul-searching here about Europe has not caused similar intellectual or emotional angst in Ireland. If our accession to the EU 40 years ago boosted our national self-confidence as a nation, our current equanimity and assuredness about our ability to defend and promote our interests in an evolving EU, indeed about our ability to run another successful Presidency, is surely a noteworthy confirmation of our evolved self confidence as a nation.

Fifth and finally, While many of my British friends – including this evening - might disagree with some of my analysis, they would, I would like to believe, be quite comfortable listening to my views. Although we should not exaggerate our influence, the fact that Irish views on Europe tend not to be resented is an important reality. And the argument we are capable of making in the EU debate here is not just reflected in the words which flow from our mouths; it's reflected in who and what we are. In our small way, our very existence as an independent country, as an EU Member State, may answer questions which are relevant to Britain's relationship with Europe: the question of whether an island nation is condemned to feeling cut off from the European continent; the question of whether a pragmatic pro-business country can make a success of EU membership; the question of whether the pooling of sovereignty can enhance rather than undermine independence.

In conclusion, let me confess to being a Spurs fan and therefore condemned to being an optimist. You will therefore have to take my optimism with a pinch of salt.

Times are difficult, including in the eurozone. The wolf may indeed be lurking at the door. But Aesop in his Fables illustrates for us what happens to those who cry wolf once too often. Remember: Greece was going to leave the Eurozone. Ireland could not recover from its debts. Portugal was in a worse state than Ireland. But, as Galileo might have put it: *e pur si muove*.

Everywhere where a serious debate has taken place about Europe in recent years, the sensible pragmatic side (not the federalist utopia tendency) could be said to have won: for example the most recent Irish referendum held in the most challenging of circumstances; and in several national general elections in which, despite predictions to the contrary, parties with constructive mainstream views on Europe have come out ahead. Yes euro-sceptic parties have gained some support; but it is rarely pointed out that – even at a time of exceptional economic difficulty and turbulence – the majority of people have supported mainstream sensible approaches to Europe. I have little doubt – albeit speaking as a Spurs fan – that the same will happen in this country over the coming years.

Debate, such as the interesting debate we can look forward to this evening, is never to be taken for granted. And the debate may not always be won. But let's not buy into the idea that it is being lost.