Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour and privilege for me to speak to you today on behalf of the Irish Presidency of the European Union. Today we welcome Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia, Malta and Cyprus as full Members of the Union. I salute the representatives of these countries who are present with us this morning and I congratulate them and their people on their wonderful achievement.

We have all spoken so much about enlargement in the past fifteen years that we run the risk of taking its significance for granted. We should not do this.

Today's enlargement of the Union is truly historic. East and West are brought together once again overcoming a legacy of division that lasted for much of the last century. We should celebrate and enjoy it.

The ten new accession countries bring with them new languages and new cultures. Judging by previous enlargements they will also bring a new consciousness and fresh ideas to the European Union.

The European Union is a unique endeavour, without parallel in history. It was conceived at a time of war and strife. Neighbouring countries had fought each other to death over land and resources. In the post war ear the very idea of so many countries coming together for the common good was inconceivable to many, but thankfully not to all.
At a crucial moment in history Europe was indeed fortunate to have men of the calibre of Schuman and Monnet who had the ability to think and nurture a big dream. This dream involved pooling resources and sovereignty in certain areas to try and find a way which was better than war, rivalry and hatred. The result is the Union which we know today.

By any yardstick the European Union has been a great success. It has achieved peace by providing a framework within which war between its Members is unthinkable. It has delivered prosperity enabling economies to grow and people to thrive. It has been a force for democracy and equality, helping members to tackle poverty and exclusion. The old norms of war, invasion, exclusion and discrimination are gone – this perhaps is the Union’s greatest achievement.

Proof of the European Union’s success is most clearly demonstrated by the voluntary accession of the new Member States. Today, the Union will have more than four times the number of member states it had at the beginning. The original six member states took a real and considerable risk when they established the European Union. They deserve our gratitude for paving the way and for adopting an inclusive approach to further membership.

In the 1950s, there was a significant group of people who firmly held the view that membership of the European Union represented a “surrender”, an “abandonment” or a “dilution” of national sovereignty. Indeed, there are those who hold that view today.
The Irish Government rejects this idea completely. In an age of globalised trade and media, sharing sovereignty in agreed areas does not represent a loss. In fact, it is quite the opposite. It represents a real and tangible gain for states by giving them an influence for which they otherwise could not hope.

With your permission I would like to set aside my Presidency hat for a while to talk as Ambassador of one of the Union's member states. In the 1920s, when we gained our independence from the United Kingdom, Ireland became a sovereign nation state. However, it was a hard struggle to translate the political fact of our sovereignty into a positive economic reality for our people.

In the first three decades of our independence, the global environment was dominated by an economic depression and armed conflict. Our economy was almost totally dependent on the British market. Our currency was tied to sterling. Our room for maneuver was severely limited. As a country, we certainly felt the limits of our sovereignty. The emigrants' boat was the sole economic alternative open to many Irish men and women. This stark reality was reflected in the fact that, four decades after independence, the population of the State had fallen by over ten per cent. The question was soften asked in Ireland what had sovereignty meant to those forced to emigrate?

At the same time, we were fortunate in some respects. We did not, unlike many European Countries, suffer an invasion from a hostile power and the loss of our hard-won independence. We were able to build and sustain a democratic culture.
We were fortunate to have political leaders with vision who saw that a better future for our people was to be found by opening up to the world and, crucially, participating in the still young project of European integration.

We laid the groundwork for our entry to the European Union in the 1960s. Successive Governments followed a consistent policy direction. And, in the longer run, we began to enjoy an economic success not known before in our history.

Our own policies were the primary ingredient for our economic success. But there is no doubt that the framework which the European Union provided was critical to us. That framework allowed Ireland to mediate the external forces over which we had little or no control. Our membership of the Union, for the first time, gave us a voice in determining the rules in which we operated. This in itself marked a quantum leap in terms of economic freedom.

Another critical factor in our success was the solidarity shown to us by our fellow member states. The structural and cohesion funds helped us to provide our people with vital skills and contributed to bridging our infrastructure deficit.

The economic transformation of Ireland has been commented upon throughout the world. We were able to show that the right domestic
policy mix, in the framework of the European Union, offers a real dynamic for growth and employment.

I know that many of the acceding countries look to Ireland as an example of an EU success story. While this is flattering I would introduce a cautionary note. We did not get it right at our first attempt. For a while in the 1970s and ‘80s, we experienced high deficits, high unemployment and high emigration. However, when we did address our domestic policy errors, our European Union membership ensured that we were able to make a rapid turnaround. For us, membership was not a guarantee of success. It was an opportunity.

And where does this leave our sovereignty? Some people look at the fact that we sometimes have to implement policies we do not like and claim that this infringes on our sovereignty. This view is strongly rejected by the Irish Government.

We believe that membership of the European Union has in fact enabled Ireland to achieve full sovereignty. Irish people are no longer compelled to emigrate to find employment. Our membership of the European Union has enabled us to bring out our full potential. Today, Irish people are a self confident and outward-looking people. This is a real and concrete expression of increased sovereignty. Our success within the framework provided by the European Union enabled us to do this.

Before we joined the European Union, we were an isolated people on the periphery of Europe. We were in the shadow of our big neighbour, the United Kingdom. But arguing our case at the Council table proved we
could punch above our weight. We could hold our own with the most powerful. We learned, in a very real sense, how to stand on our own two feet. We learned that our partners respected us when we made well-founded arguments seeking to protect our interests. We learned what solidarity meant and we came of age as a truly independent state.

As Irish society changed rapidly from being predominantly rural to more urbanised, our people grew in self-confidence. Opportunities were opened up for Irish women whose dignity was copper-fastened by the Union’s insistence on equal pay and equal opportunity. Our workers learned the importance of health and safety legislation. Our young people traveled and learned to hold their own amongst their European counterparts.

So, for Ireland our sense of ourselves as independent and equal has grown within the Union. We do not feel threatened by any notion of big versus small. Our relationship with the United Kingdom has changed beyond recognition. It is now one of genuine partnership as exemplified in our mutual search for reconciliation on the island of Ireland. I am convinced that the space the European Union provided was critical in allowing that mature relationship to develop.

This is where the real strength of the European Union lies. The spirit of tolerance, the respect for difference, the knowledge that we are all working as equals for all our people is what drives us on. The absolute commitment to finding compromise and providing a sense of ownership for all our people is fundamental to our actions. The idea of winners and losers is not what the Union is about.
A well known Irish journalist writing in the Irish Times in January this year summed up very well the profound changes which have taken place in Ireland since we joined the Union in 1973. Then, he said Europe was still an abstract concept for most Irish people. Now thanks to our economic prosperity and the advent of cheap air travel Irish people travel to airports we didn’t even know existed until Ryanair put them on the map, so to speak. Our diet has changed so much that we wonder is there a French word for baguette and whether they have tapas bars in Spain? Paninis are now as Irish as potatoes.

We meet young continentals in our hotels, bars and restaurants. For Europe and for Ireland it has been a mutually exciting experience. It is the sincere wish of the Irish Government that our ten new Member States enjoy for themselves in the years to come the benefits which we in Ireland have experienced from EU Membership.