



Speech by President Juncker at the Honorary Doctorate award ceremony by the National University of Ireland

Dublin, 21 June 2018

Chancellor Manning,

Professor O'Shea,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to start by thanking Professor O'Shea for his kind words.

I would like to thank the National University of Ireland for this important distinction. This is a great honour for many reasons.

Firstly because of where we are. The Royal College of Surgeons on St Stephens Green is a landmark in Irish history. The very spot we are standing in today hosted one of the most emblematic and dramatic chapters of the Easter Uprising. Being here today in a free and peaceful country, I am inspired by the journey Ireland has taken since then.

And I am equally honoured to join the list of Honorary Fellows from this historic University. Looking through the names, I see giants of Irish and European politics. Some of them are close friends such as the Taoisigh I have worked with during my career: John Bruton, Bertie Ahern, Brian Cowen and Enda Kenny. Leo is not yet a doctor honoris causa – he can wait.

Every one of them was a true European and saw Ireland's place at the heart of our Union. And the same can be said for another name I see on the list, dear Peter Sutherland, whom I miss greatly. These people reflect the values and the history of this University, as well as its status as a beacon of democracy.

It is exactly 100 years ago that the students of this University first elected their own parliamentary representatives. This fine tradition continues today with three members of the Senate being directly elected by National University students – although I was disappointed, negatively surprised to learn that honorary degree holders do not have a vote!

Giving young people a voice in their own destiny is something which must also inspire the future of Europe. And this is what I want to speak about today. When we talk about the future, Ireland is always a good place to start. It is the youngest, most modern and pro-European country in our European Union. And it has come a long way in the last decade alone.

Ireland's economy will grow quicker than the European average this year and next year. Unemployment is at its lowest level in a decade. And the percentage of young people in education or employment is now higher than before the crisis. This is testament to the hard work and sacrifice of the Irish people who were hit hard by the worst economic crisis in Europe since World War II. The European Union is here to support those efforts and help accelerate the economy's momentum.

This was the thinking behind the Investment Plan for Europe, which was called Juncker Plan at the beginning because people thought that they had to pre-identify the one who would be responsible for the failure. Now it works and it is called the European Fund for Strategic Investments. But it works.

It is now expected to trigger EUR 5.2 billion worth of investment in Ireland's economy, supporting over 13,000 small companies and start-ups. And it is already making a real difference on the ground. EUR 29 million is being invested in County Wicklow and across Ireland to sustain 12,000 hectares of forest.

This will help protect biodiversity, improve water resources and increase Ireland's share of forestry area from 11% closer to the EU average of 42%.

We are also investing in infrastructure which improves every day services for all. EUR 70 million from the European Investment Bank is helping to build 14 new primary care centres across the country. They will help reduce waiting times and improve patient care for the local communities.

This Irish journey to recovery is one that the rest of Europe is also embarking on. We are once again moving in the right direction. Every economy in our Union is now growing healthily. Employment is at an all-time high, with 238 million people currently working. Unemployment is at a nine-year low and consumer and business confidence is at the highest level since the turn of the century.

All of this progress in Ireland and across Europe gives us an opportunity to look ahead with confidence – with some confidence – to our future.

But we can only do that collectively.

There are two types of Member States: small ones and those who do not yet know that they are small. The other day I said that there are only two great countries in Europe: Great Britain and the Grand Duchy. The British did not like it and the Luxembourgers did not believe it.

But together, these small Member States share their sovereignty and pool their resources to make themselves stronger. This is more important today than ever before. The question for us now is how we ensure that our Union is stronger and more united in this changing world. The answer cannot come from me or from you. It must come from all Europeans. They must shape their own future.

This is why last year we started a debate on the future of our Union which has now been taken up by citizens, Parliaments and leaders across Europe. This year alone the Commission has held 403 Citizens' Dialogues, bringing the total since the start of this Commission to 846.

And I am also grateful for the Irish contribution to this debate. In particular I welcome the Taoiseach's inspiring speech on the future of our Union in front of the European Parliament earlier this year. His take on our future reflected the thoughts of many Europeans. He made a case for a united Europe in which we do more together in the areas which matter the most and less elsewhere. This "big on big things" approach has been our message since we took office back in November 2014.

This Commission has reduced the number of initiatives presented every year by more than 70%. We have simplified more than 150 laws and repealed 50 acts that no longer serve their purpose. And we removed more than 120 proposals off the table to focus work where we have a real chance to make a positive difference. And where it does not make sense for Europe to act, Europe should simply not act. For instance, it makes sense that 97% of state aids are now decided locally – no longer by the Commission, but locally.

The point is that Europe will not be less relevant if States or regions bring decisions closer to them. So our first port of call is to decide what it is we want our Union to deliver. And we must then equip ourselves with the means to achieve it.

This is the thinking behind our new long-term European budget for 2021 onwards. It prepares our economy for the future and it focuses investments in those areas where Europe has the most added-value. With resources tighter than before due to the United Kingdom's withdrawal, we have to strike a balance between fresh money and savings in some areas – and between new and old policies.

For Irish farmers, it means an allocation of EUR 10 billion over the next funding period, with 1.8 billion supporting rural development across the country. This is a moderate reduction compared to the current budget, but it is broadly in line with the overall savings from the Common Agricultural Policy. Phil is taking care of elegantly and brutally – brutally against his other colleagues, not against the farmers. Whenever I give him the floor at the Commission, I always say "First Farmer, take the floor" and he takes it – and leaves it, sometimes.

The fund will be modernised, making rules simpler for all and increasing flexibility for Ireland and other Member States to shift investment where they need it most. As you see, it is not an accident that an Irishman, my good friend Phil, is in charge of the agriculture portfolio in my team! And he is one of the best – whenever a Commissioner is in the room I say he is one of the best. It is not always true, but this time it is really true.

As he will tell you, the new budget will support Ireland's transition to a modern, innovation-led economy right across the board. Funding for research and innovation will be doubled to EUR 100 billion. A tenth of that funding will be invested in research on food, agriculture, rural development and the bio-economy. This will present a significant opportunity for Ireland and its world-class researchers.

The same goes for the digital world, where Ireland consistently ranks amongst the best performing countries. The first ever pan-European digital programme will help strengthen our global leadership.

But as we invest in our digital future, we must continue to put people and fairness first. Ireland is one of the most digitally advanced countries in Europe if not in the world, yet only 48% of people have at least basic digital skills and over half of all companies already struggle to fill vacancies because of a lack of digital skills.

Europe cannot leave anyone behind in this digital transformation. This is why we will invest across Europe to ensure that workers have the possibility to develop the skills they need. And we will support structural reforms in Member States that want to take targeted action to address this issue.

This is all part of making our economy fit for the world of today and tomorrow. And when it comes to our future, there is no greater investment than in young people. Ireland has a young, highly-educated, and highly mobile workforce. We must support them – as well as the generation that will follow.

In the last academic year, over 3000 Irish students went on an Erasmus exchange to study or work somewhere else in Europe. This is an invaluable asset for themselves, their careers and for Ireland's workforce. And equally importantly, it forges bonds across our Union, helping to create a stronger and more united Europe.

This is why we need to invest more in our young people. The Erasmus+ Programme will be bigger and better – will be doubled, in fact. And this summer alone, we will offer 15,000 travel passes for young people to discover their Union.

And we want to build on this by setting up a true European Education Area. Too many students still have no guarantee that their diplomas acquired in one Member State will be recognised in another. If we are serious about youth and if we are serious about labour mobility, we must put this right. This means building trust and links between Universities and ultimately moving to automatic recognition of qualifications.

We have put forward a European Student Card to make it easier and cheaper for students to study and learn abroad. And we will step up for support for languages, an increasingly crucial skill in today's European labour market.

Mr Chancellor,

Speaking at a University, I know I do not need to convince you of the need to invest in the future. This is your daily business. And this is what Ireland has been so successful in doing ever since it took its rightful place in our Union some 45 years ago.

But we must never stop looking to our future, leaving a stronger Union in place for those that will follow us. Just as our parents did for us.

This should be the driving force for all of us. And it is my call for all of you here in this University.

And in that spirit I want to give the last word to Peter Sutherland. Speaking last year, he said: "We have a lot in common in Europe. But there are also differences. To be able to discern those differences and embrace them is an important attribute".

As we look to our future – and look to the world around us – those words are more important than ever for our Union.

Thank you for listening, and thank you, Mr Chancellor, for the great honour.