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SPEECH BY JOHN HUME MEP MP

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Two major events took place in different parts of Europe this week.

In the European Parliament in Brussels this week, 500 delegates from all over Europe took part in a convention on full employment. Among those delegates were people from Ireland, North and South. Like their colleagues in Europe, they represented a wide range of political views with different perspectives on the way to proceed. But they were all united by one common purpose - the central role of the question of employment in maintaining the basis for a decent society. Everything else- questions of political structures, economic development, redistribution, flows from this basic question - how do we ensure that everyone has a role to play in the creation and the enjoyment of prosperity. How do we ensure that everyone has a stake in the economy, a role to play in society, and is enabled to make a positive contribution to the creation, maintenance and extension of democracy.

At the same time, one of the most fundamental moves in British politics took place. The Westminster parliament began its consideration of the Scottish and Welsh devolution proposals of the new government. At long last, the most centralised large country in Europe has made its break with its traditions of excessive centralisation and Whitehall domination. A new democracy in which institutions will be much closer to the citizens and much more accountable is now about to be created in Britain. The existence of Scottish and Welsh political institutions means that Britain is about to enter the European minstream where it is taken for granted that strong regional institutions are necessary.

I believe that this two developments are related. Only with strong regional institutions can the questions of regional development be properly addressed. I am not a recent convert to this view. I have spent most of my political life, as many of you will remember, preaching this particular message. In 1987, I produced a report on regionalisation in Ireland adopted overwhelmingly by the European Parliament. In this report, I argued the case for regional institutions in Ireland. I believe that this principle remains valid, indeed is even more important at the present time.

For instance, in 1999, the present round of regional policy expenditure by the European

problems, not factories of grievances. Scotland and Wales, in their different ways, are now in the process of establishing such institutions. Can Ireland remain, along with Portugal, the last bastion of centralism?

Outside of Ireland and, until this month, Britain, one of the most noticeable political trends of the last thirty years has been the progress made towards the regionalisation of political power structures. Germany has a federal system with extensive powers for the 15 Landers (provinces) and for Berlin. Spain has 17 regions or autonomous provinces, Italy has 20. Belgium is moving towards a three-way federal system with power dispersed to Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels region. France has 26 regional councils. All these bodies are elected.

The other member states have a variety of provisions, which often are not uniform throughout the state but which vary to take specific problems into account. Only in Ireland has there been so little progress towards decentralisation.

I do not believe that it is an accident that many of the richest parts of Europe have strong regional institutions. By liberating individuals and communities from the straitjacket of centralisation, by reducing the social and geographical distance between citizens and the administration and by enhancing the variety of flexible responses, energies have been channelled into the search for innovation, efficiency, employment and prosperity. Regions have been able to mobilise their own resources, rather than have to rely purely on lobbying central government for largesse.

It is absolutely crucial that regional institutions be given a clear mandate. They cannot be ends in themselves. Nor must be they factors of divisions within the region. They must be driven by one essential objective - the creation and maintenance of employment within the region. Everybody with something constructive to do or say must be involved.

There is a very significant development which has taken place within the North over the last couple of years. There are many lessons to learned, not just in Ireland but for the

Union will run out. We do not now what will happen yet. But there are some about which we can be sure. First, the budgetary pressures on domestic governments and on the EU budget will mean that any massive expansion of resources will be unlikely. Second, the framework in which regional policy for the 21st century will be developed will be massively influenced by the prospect of enlargement of the EU to the East. Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Hungary are already camped out in the front garden, Poland and the Baltic States are walking up the path, while other Eastern European countries have found the street.

The result will be , whatever resources are devoted to regional development, the necessity of targeting resources to the areas most in need. A country such as Ireland which has made such effective use of EU resources in many areas will no longer be considered as a whole as an area in need of assistance. The fact that recruitment agencies in Brussels are now advertising for people to work in the computer industry in Ireland shows howfar Ireland has come.

That, of course, is entirely to be welcomed. What else are the structural and cohesion funds for? It would be perverse to seek success in retaining special status, or to measure progress by one's ability to make no progress in achieving standards closer to the European average.

The problem will be for those areas of the country which have not profited to the same extent from the successes of recent years. Such areas will still need the support of the European Union in their efforts to build a sustainable economy and to end emigration and depopulation. It is time to recognise that there is no longer one Ireland, or two Irelands, but many Irelands. They may share the same aspirations but each has its different needs and requirements.

That is precisely why the regionalisation issue is so vital to areas such as the West. It is self-defeating to think in terms of the neglect of the West. The real challenge is not to criticize centralised institutions, it is to ensure that peripheral regions have their own voices in their own regions, in their member states and in Europe. The real challenge is establish regional institutions which become means of articulating and resolving

whole of Europe. Indeed this is one of the reasons why the European Commission and its President, Jacques Santer, have taken such an interest.

This is the question of the Partnership Boards which are involved in implementing the Peace and Reconciliation package. Although the Boards stem from the package, their relevance is much more general. When Jacques Santer talks of the Territorial pacts for employment, the partnership boards are an example of his idea in practice.

Essentially, the partnership boards bring together representatives of local government, the political parties, the private sector, trade unions and the voluntary sector. The aim is to involve everyone with an interest in and commitment to the social and economic development of their community. It is no secret that setting up the partnership boards was no easy task, given the divisions within the North and mutual suspicions between the different sectors. But given our experience over the last two years, there is now almost universal support for the Boards. While the Boards have come into existence because of the peace package, many people are now considering how to maintain and extend the partnerships into the long-term future. I am not suggesting that our model is the only way, or that it can be transplanted wholesale into other regions. But it would be a great pity if the fundamental lessons we have learned are not picked up elsewhere.

I think we have learnt two very serious lessons. First, there is an extraordinary and probably unsuspected range of ideas and energies within our communities, waiting for the slightest encouragement to surface. Obviously not every proposal put forward is a sound one, but there are so many good ideas waiting to be put into action. I do not think that government departments, particularly in highly centralised systems, really understand or value what ordinary citizens are capable of when their energies are mobilised. I have to admit to being pleasantly surprised by the creativity unleashed by the partnership boards and the peace package.

Second, many people have been surprised that so much potential for change exists. We now know that in many social and economic issues, local communities are much more capable of self-regeneration than those from a top-down centralist tradition

believe. We know that we cannot expect outside agencies, whatever positive role they may play, to resolve our difficulties. Change has to come from within. We must be initiators, not supplicants.

It is clear therefore that there is a need for institutions which encourage and reflect that creativity. That is why it is so important that the member states of the European Union, who were so keen to enshrine the principle of subsidiarity in the European constitution, should make the same efforts within their own jurisdictions. The idea that decisions should be taken, and policies formulated and implemented, at the lowest possible level of the political system seems to me not only common sense but a fundamental element in the political health of the country. Treat people like children and you promote kindergarten politics. Treat them as adults and you have some hope of dealing with our rapidly changing world.

When I spoke in Galway in 1991, I made it clear that Ireland was entering into a new world of rapid change, a borderless Europe and an increasingly free trade world. That prediction has come true. In many respects, Ireland as a whole has been a beneficiary of this world. We have avoided the sterile debates which have wasted time and energy in some of our neighbours. Our historic connections with the outside world have helped us come to terms with the new world system. For once, our traditional heritage has helped us modernise our attitudes far faster than some of our fellow member states. Our diaspora, the result of our tragic history and our historical tragedies, is now a major advantage.

But how much progress have the western regions of Ireland made since 1991? Such has been the transformation of the world in this decade that I am reminded of Chou En Lai's response to a question in the 1960s about the significance of the French Revolution 180 years before - It's too early to tell.

But clearly, more remains to be done. Prosperity in Ireland has been unevenly distributed, both sociologically and geographically. We are on a battlefield where the terrain, let alone the participants, never stand still. As a result a clear sense of direction is needed.

The idea that we need appropriate regional institutions capable of providing that sense of direction and of linking local communities into the wider world remains as valid now as it did in 1987 or 1991. Institutions whose prime function is ensuring that people can live and work in their native regions, and indeed making the area an attractive prospect for outsiders to come and work, remain just as necessary. In a week when Brussels put employment high on its agenda and when Westminster ended centuries of centralisation, perhaps it is time to learn from our Celtic neighbours and join our European partners in the search for a new form of society.