

## **FIRST MINISTER'S SPEECH**

Former Commissioners, distinguished guests, friends. You are very welcome.

I am delighted to see Monika and Carlo again after all these years. As we would say here, 'a lot of water has passed under the bridge' since we first met. I would also like to pay tribute to another key architect of the PEACE Programme - Jacques Delors – who unfortunately is unable to be present with us today. He has, however sent his good wishes.

I have fond memories of my time as a Member of the European Parliament in Brussels in the mid-nineties.

Together with my colleagues, John Hume and Jim Nicholson – we lobbied hard for special financial assistance to help us build a better society, a more stable society and to lay the foundations for reconciliation. I believe all three of us showed the value of working together as a team to put Northern Ireland's case in front of European politicians and officials - we are very grateful that they listened to us.

I also remember a competition in 1992 when our young people were asked to write a letter to Jacques Delors. These children are now in their 30s. One young boy from Antrim asked the President if he could give us Spanish sunshine in return for some of our rain! Perhaps this was an early indication of the potential for international co-operation?

The reality for us today – and that young boy - is that we do share – and are prepared to share – best practice with other regional partners through a range of European networks.

The first EU PEACE Programme, PEACE I, was the European Commission's response to positive developments in Northern Ireland in late 1994. It delivered 500 million Euros to peace-building projects throughout Northern Ireland and the six border counties of Ireland.

Of course, being a new Programme there were many obstacles to overcome to ensure that the funds were properly used. To reach as many citizens as possible and to reach those who most needed help.

Thanks to inspirational people like Monica, Carlo and Jacques Delors, Northern Ireland has to date benefited from more than ten years of special EU PEACE funding worth more than one billion Euro. They were courageous visionaries who were prepared to invest in us to help us build a better future for all. Their foresight and wisdom has withstood the test of time.

Since the first PEACE Programme, around 22,000 projects have been supported across Northern Ireland. This is a considerable achievement.

Although we have come a long way since the first PEACE Programme in 1999, there is still much to do. As I look back, I remember when the first Programme was launched - we were faced with job losses, factory closures and a lack of inward investment.

Compare that with the launch of PEACE III two weeks ago – when we had major announcements of new jobs in the financial services sector and significant private funds being invested from across the Atlantic.

Our aim of course is to continue to work to achieve a more stable and prosperous future for Northern Ireland.

And by the time the current Programme ends in 2013, I very much hope that we will have secured that aim and can share the lessons we have learnt to help other societies emerge from conflict.

In concluding I would like to express my gratitude on behalf of all of the citizens of Northern Ireland to the Peace Programme founders.

To the European Commission for all its support – both financial and practical over the last 15 years.

And for staying with us on the long journey to make this a better place – the best place in the world to live, learn and work!

I wish you well for this afternoon's session when you will hear evidence of the PEACE Programme at work at grassroots level. I hope that you Monika, and Carlo enjoy your stay with us.