

Address by the Minister of State, David Hanson MP, at the opening of Phase 1 of the Louvain Institute's restoration works – Tuesday, 11 July 2006

Minister Cowen, distinguished guests, friends. Thank you for your kind words of welcome and introduction. I am delighted to be back at the Institute again following my very enjoyable first visit a few weeks ago when I had the opportunity to see at first hand the development and refurbishment work going on here.

I am particularly pleased to be involved in this event today and for the opportunity to meet Minister Cowen. I know that there have been several attempts to get us together before today but without success due to diary commitments. I am also delighted to see so many here, particularly those who have travelled a distance, to mark the completion of Phase One of the Institute's development and refurbishment programme.

This is indeed a truly historic place. A place with very strong links to the island of Ireland. The establishment of a college on this site by the Franciscans 4 centuries ago was one of 35 Irish Colleges set up right across Europe. This was in effect an early European network where people from across Ireland were making a contribution to Europe as it was then. And networks are something I shall touch on again later in my speech.

I understand that since the Institute was established in 1984, it has provided programmes for over 30,000 individuals from both parts of Ireland. Programmes that have enhanced awareness of the EU for a wide range of public and private sector organisations in Ireland, north and south. This in itself is a noteworthy achievement and I congratulate you on this success.

This is an ambitious project. A project that will modernise the Institute as it approaches its 400th birthday. A project that links new buildings with the old. When you think of it, this is a reflection of what is happening within the EU itself where new Member States are being linked with the old as part of the enlargement process. I am delighted that Northern Ireland took the opportunity to contribute to this exciting project.

Northern Ireland's contribution was secured in a very difficult financial climate. But the fact the money was secured at all is testimony to the uniqueness of the Institute and the programmes it delivers; testimony to the role it has played in assisting both Government and civil society in Northern Ireland to learn at first hand about the EU and its policies; and testimony to what the Institute can achieve in the future.

A region's place in Europe is no longer defined by geography, but by how it relates to, and integrates with the broader European community. I see Northern Ireland's investment as the forward-thinking action of a region unconstrained by its geographic location on the western fringe of Europe. A region engaging on a European level to collaborate with other comparable

regions to make its voice heard. A region developing networks with others to share learning, skills and experiences.

Northern Ireland's contribution highlights a positive North/South collaboration aimed at achieving a common objective. But this is not just an island of Ireland collaboration. This venture demonstrates wider partnership working in Belgium between the Institute, the City Council and others here in Leuven. Without that co-operation this refurbishment project may never have got off the ground. I would like to acknowledge the great support given to this project by Leuven's Planning Department; by the University of Leuven, and by the Monuments and Sites organisation. This is a tangible example of European co-operation. There is a lesson for us all in that!

This space we now occupy is testimony to the fact that we are building for the future; the future of this Institute; the future of continued north/south and European collaborations; and a future for all of the people on the island of Ireland to prosper in Europe.

Northern Ireland has benefited greatly from being part of Europe. I've been in Northern Ireland for only a short time, but right across the region you can see the benefits of EU membership. We used to be an Objective 1 region. We now no longer have this status because Europe has made us more prosperous. Northern Ireland has seen the benefits. In jobs and exports, in agriculture and in improving infrastructure.

We have grown as a region and it is time to give something back. That's why our investment in this Institute in the heart of Europe is all the more pleasing. Northern Ireland is now in the position of contributing positively to Europe. We are confident in a future that sees the world becoming more inter-dependent than ever. We are confident that we will meet the challenges we face through practical and effective co-operation.

We have already begun this journey of European engagement and co-operation. Over the last 3 years we have invested €10 million of Peace Programme funds in building European networks of co-operation between civil society in Northern Ireland and continental Europe. Mobilising urban and rural communities, social partners, business and academia across the entire region has created networks that stretch from Sweden in the north, to Italy in the south. From Portugal in the west to Belarus in the east.

For the last 7 years, Northern Ireland has been heavily involved in delivering institutional capacity building in a number of Accession States. From policing in Poland, to rural development in Malta, to consumer protection in Lithuania and equality programmes in Estonia. Around 40% of the UK's entire Institutional Twinning Programme, worth €29 million, is being delivered by the Northern Ireland public service. In the run up to enlargement of the Union, Northern Ireland was engaged in integration projects in all 10 new member states. And today, we are continuing with this tradition in Turkey and Bulgaria. A remarkable achievement!

That is why I would like to see the Institute continuing to play a role in promoting Northern Ireland in Europe, to raising our profile in what is now a very competitive Europe of regions, and to raising the awareness of European issues in Northern Ireland through the delivery of tailored programmes and events.

The Institute has maintained the tradition of those early Irish Colleges in developing a wealth of established networks. I would like us to tap into those networks. I would like to see the Institute working more closely with civil society groups in Northern Ireland to assist them in developing structured sustainable networks and partnerships. I would like to see the Institute working closely with our Office in Brussels to maximise our profile and to pursue common agendas for Northern Ireland in Europe. With the Institute's prime location in the heart of Europe, I believe it can play a pivotal role in Northern Ireland becoming the preferred region of choice for people to work, to live and to invest.

I congratulate the Institute and its Board, many of whom are here today, on the work completed so far. This magnificent auditorium is an excellent example of what can be achieved using an historic setting to create a modern building.

I look forward with anticipation towards the completion of your project next year. A very significant year for the Institute. I believe that Northern Ireland can play its part in delivering a diversity of partnerships that can be sustainable. And none more so that the partnership reflected here today. Let us face the future together to achieve this shared aim.

I wish you every success for the future and as you fast approach your 25th anniversary in 2009, here's to the next 25 years of success.