

## **Deputy First Minister's speech**

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you all to Parliament Buildings tonight, to honour our distinguished guest Hans-Gert Pöttering, President of the European Parliament. President Pöttering – it is a very great pleasure to celebrate your visit here this evening. I hope you will take away fond memories of your experiences here today.

The European Parliament represents democracy, tolerance and solidarity among the 27 nations and peoples that comprise the European Union. As an institution, the European Parliament is unparalleled anywhere else in the world – defending democracy, human rights and human dignity. It is a symbol – a beacon – of ‘Unity in diversity’.

Despite deep historical differences going back many centuries, the European Union has built a common future for its peoples. When the Treaties of Rome were signed in 1957 – over half a century ago – by just 6 Member States –

Europe was a very different place from what it is today. And what it will become tomorrow.

As Europe has grown in size and complexity, the need to enhance understanding and tolerance among its various cultures, communities and religions has become ever greater. The response from the European Commissioner for culture – Jan Figel, who visited recently and met with Ministerial colleagues – was to promote 2008 as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

Slovenia inaugurated the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in January under its Presidency of the European Union.

Europe has achieved a global role in enhancing dialogue between cultures and faiths. It has provided leadership in seeking to avoid the clash of cultures that blights the well-being of the modern world. I want to compliment President Pöttering for his contribution - for being a tireless and worthy ambassador for the Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

For many, our relationship with Europe has been one of net beneficiary of European aid.

However, I believe that we have much to offer Europe in terms of promoting dialogue and peace building. We can aid regions within Europe and on behalf of Europe in the rest of the world.

This role has been reflected in the findings of the Barosso Taskforce, which recognised that we can act as a reference point for conflict resolution. Let me be clear: we do not have the solutions to all conflicts, however, we can share our lessons.

We have approached intercultural dialogue from a broader perspective here than might have been witnessed elsewhere. Our dialogue is in terms of community cohesion – not just cultural activity.

However, we have much to learn from our neighbours in Europe.

We have seen a substantial increase in new migrants since the last enlargement of the European Union in 2004, with the latest estimates pointing to 46,000 migrants in employment here.

The European unification project needs to be more than just a single market and economic growth. We need a Europe that is capable of building and maintaining cohesive societies – societies that integrate migrants successfully. This is critical in a global economy where competitiveness is determined by flows of labour, knowledge and capital.

The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue is fundamentally about honest dialogue involving respect, tolerance and mutual understanding. Many of you here this evening directly promote these important values in your day to day work. And President Pöttering has seen at first hand the valuable work that many of you are engaged in when he visited the 'Education for Diversity' in Lisburn and the 'Suffolk and Lenadoon Interface Group' projects this afternoon. I congratulate both projects on their success and wish them well for the future.

Nowhere is the need for the values of respect, tolerance and mutual understanding more evident than in work at community interfaces and with our new migrant communities. The voluntary, community and youth sectors make huge strides in challenging sectarianism and racism - improving the lives of this region's citizens.

Through our Programme for Government, we will continue to support this work. We remain fully committed to a shared and better future for all. We want a fair and inclusive society for all our citizens, regardless of their origins or culture.

The European project began following the mass destruction of two world wars. Its aim was to replace conflict with cooperation, peace and prosperity. Since its inception much has changed, with greater integration, changing borders and boundaries, and the sharing of prosperity. We have much to learn from this approach, and much to offer by way of our own experiences of reconstruction and conflict transformation.

We want to continue this journey with our European partners.

I now call upon President Pöttering.