

KEYNOTE ADDRESS  
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TO CONFERENCE ON  
"TRANSPORT IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND REPUBLIC OF IRELAND  
COMMON PROBLEMS : COMMON SOLUTIONS"

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I am happy to be back in Belfast again, and it is a pleasure that the occasion of this visit is a conference arranged by Co-operation North. Since its inception in 1979 I have had several opportunities to admire the courage and realism<sup>of</sup> this organisation and its leaders, and to remark its steady progress. I was pleased as a European Commissioner to be able to recommend Co-operation North as an enterprise worthy of Community support and funding. The interest shown then by the Commission has been amply recompensed.

The spirit of Cooperation North, as I see it, is both practical and visionary. Above all, it is courageous. It remains undismayed by the difficult, often tragic events which this island has experienced for a decade and a half. It has responded to political violence and economic setback by daring to act and innovate, when others have managed only to wring their hands. It has proceeded on the principle that it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

The practical idealism of Cooperation North has led to a series of carefully planned and executed initiatives, which, taken together, amount to a telling contribution, a line of candles burning strongly over the past few years.

The approach to the critical problems facing all the people of this island has been to proceed by strict technical and indeed commercial criteria, without the intrusion of political controversy. It is in this spirit that Co-Operation North has already produced valuable reports on Energy and Agriculture, and that today's conference has before it an important study of transport in Ireland.

In commending this approach I am struck by its distinct resemblance to the attitude underpinning much of the work done by the European Community.

People who look for an unbroken sequence of spectacular political initiatives from the European Community often complain that we spend too much time fretting over apparent trivia - the labelling of groceries, say, or the weights of lorries. But it is precisely through the resolution of small, even tedious, details of this kind, that the grand design of European integration can be concretely realized. You need the grand design, but you must have the minutiae as well.

In somewhat similar fashion, I think, Co-Operation North has wisely chosen a field of action some distance away from the high ground of political and constitutional debate. It has done so in the conviction that the atmosphere on that high ground can be significantly improved if the simpler everyday things are imaginatively handled.

Transport is indeed one of those everyday things which needs imaginative handling, and doesn't always get it. This neglect is unfortunate.

It seems to me clear that an efficiently co-ordinated transport system can stimulate economic growth and employment. It can also have a significant impact in the political, social and cultural arenas. I am thinking now of a system which maximised the efficient use of air, sea, inland waterways, road and rail services. Such a combination would be of incalculable value in this island. The question arises: what can the European Community do to bring it about?

The first thing to say is that much has already been done to improve transport facilities, in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, through the agency of the Regional Fund. On the other hand, one could not claim that the interventions of this fund have yet been co-ordinated to any significant extent, still less that they have been carried out in the context of a defined strategy for Transport Policy. Such a strategy is being patiently put together in the Community. I am convinced that it will bear fruit, that its ideas will be matched by an appropriate financial effort. But this will take time.

I know something of this time-scale, personally. When I was Transport Commissioner for four years we had already roughed out a design for a renewal of Europe's transport infrastructure. It was in 1976 that the Commission proposed a series of measures designed to assist transport infrastructure projects. The thinking behind these measures was that there was a role for the Community acting together which could be more effective than the efforts of Member States trying to go it alone. What was proposed was to use the Community budget to provide assistance in two ways:

First, for those transport projects - roads, railways, ports and so on - that were shown to be of value to the Community, of "Community interest" in the jargon. The plan was to direct money to the sponsoring body, not necessarily the central government, in order to get them off the ground. The second role for the Community budget was to aid a number of countries, Northern Ireland and the Republic included, which do not have the necessary finance to maintain and develop roads and other infrastructures at the rate that is necessary to ensure they can play a full role in the Community.

Community help along these lines would be simple good sense. There would be nothing altruistic about it: rather it would be motivated by clear-headed self-interest. Take the case, for example, of a project for an electric railway in Ireland. Let us suppose that the national exchequer cannot find all the money but could undertake the scheme if there was Community assistance. The project is important for the Community in a number of ways. For instance, it can improve the general level and quality of transport services, hence making industry as a whole more competitive, or, again it can facilitate the use of electricity to replace imported oil.

Assume that some of the richer members of the Community were to provide that assistance in the form of net transfers from their budgets to the Community budget. Is this worth their while? The answer, I suggest is an emphatic "yes". Germany, for example, would be likely to see a substantial flow back to its home industries as the coaches and engines would very likely come from Germany. France for its part might well supply the electrical components. And so on.

That its merits have not been universally perceived and the proposal implemented is disappointing, but not entirely surprising in view of the Community's current predicament. It is notorious that we have in the Budget too little money chasing too many policies, with priority necessarily being given to the Community's obligatory expenditure, and especially agriculture.

But progress has been made. A serious effort is now under way to enlarge the Budget and to achieve within it a better balance of policies. As part of that effort, Transport has begun to emerge from the Cinderella shadows. I believe we shall soon have a fund for transport infrastructure with solid resources behind it.

What could such a fund do in Ireland? Let me take the case of our North-South axis. This can be truly described as the transport back bone of Ireland. Unfortunately this backbone has more than a few imperfections. Neither the road nor the railway service achieve the quality that users have the right to expect on such a vital link. This is not to under-estimate the efforts of those concerned with the link; it is simply to acknowledge that the roads and the railways are not up to date: they still represent the technology of the Fifties and the costs which this imposes upon the country are substantial.

In cases like this the proof of Community interest in the improvement of facilities must be self-evident. The Community needs to be made aware by the two responsible authorities, British and Irish, of the problems and the medium term solutions that are proposed. A package of measures extending over a number of years would permit the application of Community help in a well balanced effective level. The package could include both the road and the railway. It would involve the use of industrial resources in the other Member States of the Community that are currently idle.

This is the sort of project which I believe should figure in the Community infrastructure plan. In the Republic there are small but still valuable schemes which are likely to receive assistance. The Commission's list of projects proposed to the Council for support from the 1983 Budget includes the Shankill-Bray bypass south of Dublin, and the Wexford bypass. These are worthwhile developments, but they do no more than touch the surface of the problem.

What is needed is concerted action by all concerned. We need a major planning effort to ensure that the link between Larne and Rosslare, and especially that section which connects Dublin and Belfast, is made fit for the requirements of the 1980s and beyond.

It would be useful if Co-Operation North, to which all of us are already substantially indebted, could apply its energies and its imagination to a project of this kind.