

# Britain in the USA

## The British Presidency - Giving Europe back to the people. Speech by the British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, in Dublin

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*Speech by the British Foreign Minister, Robin Cook, to the Institute for European affairs. 3 November 1997*

When the new Labour Government was elected in May, we promised we would transform Britain's relations with Europe. We promised that Britain would be a key and committed player in Europe, not an uncooperative minority of one. We promised this because we believed in European co-operation. We believe that Europe needs to work together now more than ever before. We believe that the challenges that face us are not challenges that we can face alone.

Because the world is changing fast. The economy is becoming ever more global. Trade is growing at twice the speed of production. British Airways does its backroom work in Bombay, while a baker in South Yorkshire is taking on 50 new staff because his baguettes are selling so well in France. Yesterday's solutions will not work for tomorrow.

But political leaders must be careful that as we build supra-national structures, we do not lose contact with the people. We need to reconnect the peoples of Europe with the European Union which their governments are trying to create. They need to know that the EU is relevant to their lives. The EU seems to spend too much of its time discussing things that do not touch the people's lives, abstractions and institutions rather than a concrete agenda. The people need to believe that their agenda is also our agenda. Britain has a mission as President of the European Union - to give Europe back to the people.

Three issues are of paramount concern to the people of Europe. First is finding and keeping a job. Over 18 million people are unemployed in the EU. 5 million of them are under 25. That means one in ten of Europe's young people are jobless. And those in work often feel less secure than they used to be. Many of us started work at a time when jobs were for life. Now changing jobs and even careers is the norm. The modern economy is very exciting for those who are prepared for it, for those with the skills to flourish in the new market-place. But many feel threatened by it, and many are excluded from it. We must make sure that the modern economy is an inclusive one, that brings in all sectors of society.

The EU has a major role in that process. The forthcoming Jobs Summit will set an agenda for putting Europe back to work. We will use our Presidency to pursue that agenda with vigour. By helping governments find the best ways to help their people find and keep jobs. The EU should be a clearing-house for innovation. And by pursuing the four goals which the Commission has identified in its draft guidelines, which match well with the new Labour Government's policies.

First, promoting employability. Governments must make sure that our people have the skills they need to find work. We need to make sure that our society does not split into those with skills who can benefit from the modern economy, and those without who risk being permanently excluded from it. We need to give all our people the education and the skills they need so they can use their talents and embrace the new economic reality with confidence.

The new Labour Government has offered a New Deal for the unemployed - helping them learn new skills and find jobs. Because the only real job security in the modern world comes from employability. Of course, I am preaching to the converted in Dublin, where unemployment has come down and migration has been reversed. The miracle has been pulled off through keeping the Irish economy competitive and ensuring Irish school leavers emerge on to the jobs market armed with the skills that companies need.

The second goal is flexibility. Companies must be able to adapt to a fast-changing market. Otherwise,

they stop being competitive and cannot create jobs. This does not mean blind deregulation. All workers are entitled to decent minimum standards. But we must guarantee basic standards in the workplace without over-burdening business and destroying jobs. Red tape cannot protect jobs or promote growth. Skills and competitiveness can.

Third, entrepreneurship. We must be able to turn creativity and innovation, of which Europe has plenty, into jobs and growth. To do this, we must nurture small businesses, and encourage them to take on workers - by lightening their administrative burden, reducing the non-wage costs of taking on new people, and encouraging investment in new companies.

Finally, equal opportunities. All those who want to work must be given the chance, not just the young or able-bodied or those without family commitments. This means improving child-care provisions and encouraging flexible working arrangements. It means enforcing anti-discrimination legislation so that nobody is denied work because of their sex or the colour of their skin. It means looking at the particular needs of disabled people.

The Luxembourg Jobs Summit will not be the end of the process, but a new start. In Cardiff eight months later we will be looking at what progress we have achieved. We will not let up, so that young school-leavers can enter the jobs market with confidence, so that young entrepreneurs who are trying to create jobs should not have to complain of skills shortages, and so that people who have been unemployed for long periods of time should get another chance to re-equip themselves with skills and find jobs.

The other key to creating jobs is staying competitive. And a key part of staying competitive is making the Single Market work - an area where Ireland and the UK have led the way. But there is still some way to go before we can claim that the Single Market is complete. We will be working hard on the Single Market Action Plan we approved in Amsterdam, and together with the Luxembourg and Austrian Presidencies we aim to get it completed by the end of 1998. We need to implement the directive liberalising electricity markets, so competition between suppliers can lead to lower electricity prices for consumers and businesses. In Britain we have seen how freeing up the telecoms market leads to better service, more choice and lower prices; we will use our experience to ensure that telecoms liberalisation in Europe, due on 1 January 1998, is effective and on time. We also need to make sure that all businesses have a fair chance to compete for the 720 billion ECU that European governments spend on goods and services each year.

We need to tear down the remaining barriers to borderless trade, making sure that things like technical standards do not remain as a subtle form of protectionism. We need to simplify the Single Market rules and enforce them properly. We need to ensure that they are reflected properly in the laws of all the EU's members. Then we will have a genuine Single Market, free of the distortions of hidden barriers and unfair state aid. Then we will have a Europe that can work for the people, and put the people back to work.

Next to insecurity at work in importance as a concern to the people is insecurity in the home and on the street from fear of crime. The drugs trade is second only to the oil trade in turnover. In 1995 there were over 6,500 deaths in Europe directly relating to drugs. The drugs trade is one of the most integrated in Europe. Its agents are streets ahead of government in working together across borders. If we are to catch them, we need to match them, with teamwork and international co-operation of our own. And we must be prepared to stand up to them. Many people in Britain join the Irish people in saluting Veronica Guerin, who gave her life exposing those behind the drugs trade. The best tribute we can pay her is to show the same courage and determination in taking on the drugs barons - helping young lives from being ruined by drugs, and families from being torn apart by addiction.

It was George Bernard Shaw who said that people have got so accustomed to a life seasoned with crime that they cannot contemplate a life without it. The people look to government to do everything within our power to fight crime. Working with other governments is a key part of that. We have built outstanding co-operation between the UK and Ireland. We want to use the British Presidency to see co-operation enhanced across the whole of Europe. We need to get Europol launched as soon as we can,

so that Europe's police forces can work together effectively and share intelligence. We must make sure that Europe's police forces can use the latest technology to fight crime. We will sign an agreement allowing our Customs authorities to work closely together. We will attack the drugs trade right at its heart, by helping the drug-producing countries in Central Asia and the Caribbean stem the flow. That is the way to show the people that the European Union shares their concerns, and is acting on them.

Another concern of the people of Europe is their environment. Scientists predict global warming will lead to floods in the north of Europe and droughts in the South. Up to 14 million people across Europe are suffering from the effects of ambient air pollution. The environment matters to people. The EU's policies need to reflect that. The EU transport policy has a major impact on the environment. We must ensure it is a positive one. The same is true of the EU's energy policy. We will use the British Presidency to bring environmental considerations into the centre of the EU's decision-making process, not keep them as an afterthought. Agriculture is a prime example. That is one reason the British Government has welcomed the Commission's proposals for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and their focus on the environmental dimension.

Britain's Presidency comes at the same time as three important international projects on the environment - follow-up to the Kyoto climate change talks, and negotiations in the UN on providing clean water and sanitation for all the world's population, and on managing the world's forests. The EU is already giving an impressive lead in these international talks. The British Presidency will maintain that lead. And Britain is committed to leading by example. We have set ourselves the challenging target of a 20 per cent cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2010.

Jobs, crime, and the environment. These are our priorities for the Presidency. They are the concerns of the people, not the preoccupations of the politicians.

Besides the mission I have outlined, much of our work will be managing the EU's business, taking forward the existing agenda. I know that our partners will be judging us on the competence, the efficiency and the drive with which we take forward the European agenda. They shall not find us wanting. We are already working closely with the present Luxembourg Presidency, and with the Austrians who will be following on from us. We are determined to hit the ground running.

The most momentous decision that will be taken during our Presidency will be on Economic and Monetary Union. The key decision will be made on who qualifies for Stage Three of the process, and agreeing which currencies are to be locked together. Last week the British Chancellor said that Britain will not be joining in 1999. We believe that in principle British membership of a successful single currency would be beneficial to Britain and Europe. But the timing is wrong for us. In applying the Chancellor's five economic tests we concluded that it is not in the UK's interest to join in the first wave. I understand the anxiety with which Ireland has followed these developments. I know you intend to join in 1999, and I know you are concerned the impact this will have on economic relations with a Britain not yet part of the single currency. We are alive to your concerns. We shall now be working to meet the economic tests we have set ourselves so that we shall be in a position to join should we wish to early in the life of the next Parliament. We shall be stepping up our dialogue with the business community to help them prepare for the single currency. We are launching a series of regional conferences, and consulting with the City, industry and the unions. The debate must not be limited to the political elite. The people must understand the issues, and they must give their consent.

The new Labour Government will also be stepping up our dialogue with the people. EMU is one of the biggest decisions we will ever have to take. That is why we promised a referendum before we commit Britain to joining the single currency. That is why we will make sure that the issues are explained clearly and honestly. The debate so far has generated more heat than light.

Britain will be in the chair when the crucial decision is made next May. As Presidency, we will discharge this responsibility to the very best of our abilities, fully and scrupulously in a way that shows our constructive approach to Europe at its best. We want Economic and Monetary Union to be a success. Even though we will not be taking part in the first wave in 1999, it is still in our interests that it should succeed. We will use our Presidency to ensure that those countries who wish to form a single

currency can get off to the best possible start.

Economic and Monetary Union is not the only momentous step the EU is about to take. During the British Presidency we will be starting negotiations with countries that want to join the European Union. One of our key objectives will be to make sure these are successful. Enlarging the EU is an historic opportunity, both for the EU and for its new members. It will fulfil the challenge set a decade ago when the Iron Curtain was brought down - to create a prosperous, peaceful Europe. And prosperity and peace are the two over-riding needs of the people.

The way forward is to launch negotiations as soon as possible with those countries best prepared for membership. Some are ready for the rigours of the Single Market and the far-reaching commitments which EU membership brings. Others are not. Opening talks with those who still are not yet ready would raise hopes unfairly. It would soon leave them disappointed and disillusioned. It would distract their attention from the pressing task of creating a functioning market economy. So the British Presidency will have two important objectives - to get negotiations under way as quickly as we can with those who are ready to join, and to help those who have further to travel, to make sure that they do not feel they are being rejected. The enlargement process must be like a pipeline - all the applicant countries are in it, moving at their own speeds but towards the same goal, all with the promise of eventual membership. And also all with the promise of support along the way - support to help them reform their economies, privatise their state-owned corporations, strengthen their public administrations.

To show that this is an inclusive process, we are proposing a European Conference, in which all the European applicants will take part. This will show that although EU membership itself may take time, we already regard the applicants as partners and members of the European family.

Enlargement is part of a wider project. Together with the Agenda 2000 reforms proposed by the Commission, they make up a vital package to modernise the EU. The EU has to change to meet the challenges posed by enlargement, and by the changing world.

The Common Agricultural Policy is one example. It made sense in the 1950s against a background of food shortages. But it needs modernisation now. The Commission has come up with proposals, and during our Presidency we will want to take forward the debate on those proposals. I know the strength of feeling on reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, and the divergence of views about how it is best done. There is much that we can agree on. A modernised agricultural policy must support our farmers, but at lower cost to the taxpayer and at lower cost to the consumer, and preserving rural communities and the rural environment.

We will use our Presidency to take a hard look at how the EU is financed, and how the money is spent. We all know this is difficult territory. As one of my predecessors as Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, said in another context, 'if you open that Pandora's box, you never know what Trojan horses will jump out'. But the people want to know that the burden is shared fairly, that the regional aid to help the poorest areas goes to the areas which need them most. They want hard action on fraud, to know that their money is not being wasted or siphoned off.

Finally, the British Presidency will have a duty to speak for Europe in the world. The EU can be a major player on the world stage, but only if we can co-ordinate EU foreign policy effectively.

We will make sure that the people of Europe know that the countries of Europe are speaking with one voice, and that working together we carry more clout than working individually. We will use our Presidency to develop an EU Code of Conduct on arms exports. We shall ensure that human rights remain a key factor in the EU's relations with the rest of the world. I know this is an area of great interest to Ireland, and we were delighted by the recent appointment of Mary Robinson as UN Commissioner for Human Rights. We will be working closely with her.

Ours is an ambitious agenda. We cannot and are not aiming to complete in six months. But we can make a start on some important new priorities, and in doing so help give a new direction to the EU. Making the EU relevant to the people's lives. Making the EU receptive to the people's concerns. Restoring the

people's faith in the European project. Giving Europe back to the people.

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