

## IRISH PRESIDENCY CONFERENCE 2004

Families, Change and Social Policy in Europe

Dublin Castle, Dublin, Ireland, 13-14 May 2004

OPENING SPEECH BY MARY COUGHLAN TD MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AND FAMILY AFFAIRS, IRELAND

Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure, on behalf of the Irish Presidency, to welcome you to this International Conference on "Families, Change and European Social Policy".

May 2004, which has seen the accession of 10 new Member States to the EU, is and will remain a period of major significance in the history of the European Union. I wish, therefore, to extend a special warm welcome to the representatives of the new Member States at this first social policy Conference of the Enlarged Union

It is appropriate, perhaps, that the theme of this Conference is related to families, because we, in the European Union, in a real sense form a family of nations. This is based on the commitment we share to supporting each other in working to achieve the greater wellbeing of the EU's 450 million citizens and greater social cohesion within and among our countries.

There is much to inspire us in the creation of one of the largest families of nations in the history of Europe, as we come to focus in this Conference on individual families, the basic units of our societies both in Europe and worldwide.

This year, of course, is the 10th Anniversary of the UN International Year of the Family. One of the reasons the Irish Presidency chose this theme was to help us at EU level join in this Anniversary year's worldwide focus on the impact of the profound changes affecting families, and on how we can better support families, through social policy, in meeting the major challenges arising from these changes.

I particularly welcome, Johan Scholvinck, Director of the Social Policy and Development Division of the United Nations, who has come from New York to be with us for the occasion.

There are great similarities between all societies worldwide in relation to the role and functions of families. But there are also significant differences in the way these roles and functions are exercised with regard to values, traditions, culture and the stages reached in respect of social and economic development. This also applies among the countries of the European Union. Families and family life are fundamental to a country's way of life and this helps to explain why we in the EU wish to retain sovereignty at national level with regard to family policy. As a result, the EU Treaties do not provide competence for action at EU level in relation to family policy as such.

However, the profound and rapid changes affecting families and family life, which we will be discussing later, have major implications for policies for which the EU has a certain competence, not least for social policy which we will be examining at this Conference. Likewise, many of the policies being pursued in the context of the EU have a major impact on families and on their traditional roles and functions, for which a social policy response may also be required.

One of the tasks which EU countries have set themselves, with the support of the EU institutions, including the EU Commission, is to modernise their systems of social protection. Adapting and developing the systems to take account of family change is a major part of this process and a key theme for this Conference.

One of the major changes affecting families is the growing participation of women in the workforce, a development Member States have been asked to encourage by the European Council, as part of the Lisbon Agenda. This brings with it the challenge of how to reconcile work and family life and, in particular, how care in the family for children, elderly and other dependent family members can be provided, and employment and legitimate employment prospects maintained. Significant time will be devoted at the Conference to the key aspects of these developments and the policy implications.

Profound changes affecting families put various groups at risk of social exclusion. Those most at risk include lone parent families and large families. They experience obstacles to obtaining employment, the main route out of poverty and social exclusion, and to getting jobs that will provide an adequate income to meet the needs of all their family members.

Older people, especially the growing numbers living alone, mainly women, are also increasingly vulnerable, as smaller families do not have the capacities they had in the past to provide care and support for their older members. The challenge of caring for and supporting older people is likely to intensify in the decades ahead as the ratio of those in the active age groups to older people falls from the 5 to 1 that prevailed on average over recent decades, to less than 2 to 1 in the decades ahead. This theme will also be covered at the Conference.

A first key stage in meeting a challenge is to understand its nature and scope. I am confident that our discussions and exchanges this morning will greatly assist us in improving our understanding of the changes affecting families. In the workshops and through the later presentations and responses, we can begin to examine effective ways of meeting these challenges and exchange good practices.

These exchanges are invaluable in terms of policy development. The diversity among all 25 countries of the EU is a great strength, as it offers many examples of the different actions which can be taken and of tried and tested good practice.

We hope that it will be possible to facilitate these exchanges on families, change and European social policy on an ongoing basis at EU level, and how to effectively achieve this may be a further theme for reflection at the Conference.

In conclusion, it is worth pointing out that families are among the oldest institutions in our society. Over the millennia they have successfully adapted to many changes. Our focus on today's problems and challenges, therefore, should be balanced with a clear realisation of the major contributions families have been making to society and to the well being of individuals down through the ages.

Our overall focus, therefore, should be on examining how families and family life as a major resource of our societies can be better supported and strengthened in making their key contribution to society at this time of great change.

Finally, I wish you most successful discussions, exchanges and networking at the Conference over the next two days and an outcome that will greatly help us in effectively supporting families throughout the EU. I hope that your visit to Dublin will also be most enjoyable and if you have time to visit outside of Dublin, I would recommend Donegal!

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