Opening Ceremony Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern, T. D.
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Welcome to you all.

Today we start a new year. And we begin our Presidency of the European Union.
Our Presidency will last six months. During those months a profound transformation will take place in the European Union. It will grow from fifteen member states to twenty-five; its largest single expansion. We will mark this historic day here in Dublin with a major event to welcome our old friends and new partners into the European Union.
The Union is testimony to the fact that people prosper when they put their differences aside and focus on what unites them. We should never lose sight of this.
For nearly fifty years now, the European Union has succeeded. The ten accession countries, who will formally join us in May, want to be part of this success. Their people strongly confirmed their desire to be part of the European Union in referendums during 2003.
The people of Europe - Europeans working together - have created an area of peace and prosperity. We have created an enlarged space in the world, which stands for the values for which all decent and good people stand. As we look to the future, we should let the past inform our action.
We start this Presidency on the brink of a major and ongoing enlargement of the European Union. And we start the Presidency with the major task of moving forward work on the draft Constitutional Treaty.
Clearly, it was disappointing that it was not possible to reach agreement on the new Treaty in Brussels last month. However, a process of reflection and consultation has now begun. I propose to report to the Spring European Council on how and when we can move ahead.
The desire to build consensus will be our motivating force. As Presidency, I pledge that we will be even-handed and open. We will build on the good progress made by the Italian Presidency. We will listen to all our partners. We will make every effort.
I cannot promise success but I will promise that we will work very hard to achieve it.
We will also ensure that the pressing business of the Union - economic reform, the justice agenda, and the continued building of Europe's relations with its neighbours, near and far, will continue.
Some time ago, the European Union set itself the task of becoming the most competitive economy in the world. We said that we would create more and better jobs. We said we would work for greater social cohesion and a high level of environmental protection. And we said we would do this by 2010.
We will remain focused on these key goals and set identifiable benchmarks towards their achievement.
Greater freedoms in the internal market must not be exploited by criminal elements for illicit gains. We have a wide-ranging agenda in the justice and home affairs area. We will seek to move this agenda forward significantly.
We will seek to ensure greater security and safety for all the people of the European Union.
The European Union plays a major role on the world stage. As Presidency, we will engage with our partners and ensure all interests and concerns are taken into
account. We will place a particular emphasis on transatlantic relations. We will also emphasise the importance of all nations of the world working together in the interest of effective international relations. And we intend to make further progress on the issues of conflict prevention and human rights.

In addition, we will work to ensure that our agreed agenda in all other areas is carried forward for the next six months. We will seek to do so effectively and efficiently. It is obvious that this agenda is demanding and complex. The time we have is finite. We begin this work today with ambition and with humility. And above all, with determination to serve Europe well and to show that though we are small, we can be as effective as any. I look forward to working on behalf of the people of Ireland to ensure that our Presidency is an outstanding success, and one of which that we can all be extremely proud.

Thank You