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Mary Robinson, *President of Ireland*. - Mr President, Distinguished Members, it is a special pleasure for me to speak to the elected representatives of the European Union today. And since I am speaking in a place which is acutely aware of the heritage of all the countries which compose the Union, I would like to begin by speaking briefly in the Irish language. The languages of the peoples of the European Union are a precious part of its culture, and a very conscious part of its programme. They represent the many ways in which the peoples of this Union speak and think and envision their future. And so, in the happy knowledge that it is very European, let me begin by speaking Irish.

(It is a particular honour for me to have this opportunity to speak to the European Parliament. This Institution's authority comes from the citizens of Europe and it has a special place in the heart of the Union. The Parliament has for a long time been a yardstick of the views of the people of Europe. I am keenly aware that the members of this body are working with foresight and commitment to build a permanent Europe.)

(Applause)

The European Parliament has over the years provided a forum for many of the great European statesmen and women without whose vision the European ideal would not have been realised. Moreover, it represents the rich diversity of European culture, a diversity which strengthens the Union and gives it its unique character. Together with the Council and the Commission, it provides the delicate institutional equilibrium which underpins the operation of the Union.

As you have indicated, Mr President, the desire of the Irish people to reaffirm and re-establish their European vocation dates back several centuries, long predating the time of our application for membership of the European Community. Our historical and cultural reference points are rooted in European traditions. As you know, down through the centuries Irish missionaries played a key role in cultural, religious and social advancements across the continent and made an indelible contribution to European identity. In more recent times, the continuing Irish presence throughout Europe and indeed elsewhere, has been assured by the Diaspora of young Irish people.

This historical perspective sets in context the very real and heartfelt desire of the Irish people to reforge the links of friendship and the shared tradition with the European mainland.

Since the accession of Ireland to the Community in 1973, our people have had the opportunity to reaffirm and restate their commitment to Europe. Through the medium of the ballot box in 1987 and 1992, as you noted, we voted overwhelmingly to remain at the heart of Europe. The people of Ireland have underlined their attachment to further European integration and have let it be known that they wish to be active participants in consolidating the basis and the foundation for the construction of the new Europe.

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My visit here to the European Parliament comes at a time of great hope and optimism on the island of Ireland. For the first time in a generation it is free of paramilitary violence. With the achievement of peace, there is a unique opportunity to forge a new partnership with the two main traditions in Northern Ireland.

I believe that the forces of healing, reconciliation and shared interest that have inspired the construction of Europe are today increasingly transforming the economic and political landscape of the island of Ireland.

We in Ireland are addressing with renewed vigour and hope the task of building new forms of co-operation. In this task, our shared partnership in Europe can be a common point of reference for all the people on the island of Ireland.

It is right to express here, in this city so symbolic of the spirit of European reconciliation, deep appreciation for the consistent and unwavering support of the European Union in encouraging the process of reconciliation and dialogue in Ireland. It is also appropriate that I express particular appreciation of the strong support of the European Parliament - an elected assembly with representatives from both parts of the island of Ireland - for the peace process.

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