

**Speech by Mr Dominic Hannigan, Chair of the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs
of the Irish Houses of the Oireachtas at the L COSAC Meeting
29 October 2013, Vilnius**

Mr Chairman, fellow parliamentarians, ladies and gentlemen,
Let me begin by thanking the Lithuanian Presidency for placing this topic on the agenda of COSAC. I am very pleased to be able to share with you some of my thoughts.

Recent reports by the Commission and by President Van Rompuy have intensified the debate and emphasised the need for greater democratic legitimacy and accountability to accompany further integration in EMU. In doing so, they shone a light on the role of Parliaments in the EU and, I would argue, raised expectations.

Raised expectations that we would begin to address the worsening democratic deficit across the Union. Because, none of us can be in any doubt that over the last number of years trust and belief in European institutions has reduced.

Look for instance at the turnout in European Parliament elections. In 1979 it was 62%, but in each election since then this has reduced gradually, and in the last election in 2009 it stood at 43%.

How much of the drop is due to the fact that people don't know who they are voting for, because of the list system, or because the person they vote for hands over their seat to a substitute during the parliament's term?

The worrying trend here is that the turnout and buy-in to the European Parliament is reducing while simultaneously a greater role is being given to the Parliament.

At the same time National Parliaments are concerned about a perceived transfer of powers away from them.

I say perceived because treaties such as the Treaty of Lisbon and the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance – the Fiscal Compact, have clearly set-out roles for National Parliaments in a bid to improve democratic legitimacy. But these positive developments have been undermined and overtaken to a certain extent by the executive-driven measures that were needed in the midst of the financial crisis.

Undermined, because the key tools that the European institutions have introduced to address the crisis - the six-pack and the two-pack - have alienated the average citizen even more from the decision-making process.

This *disconnect* is compounded by the complexity of the issues we are faced with. The speed of change, combined with the measures introduced to deal with the crisis, without *popular* debate, has heightened the belief that Europe is not improving the lives of our citizens, and is indeed *complicit* in the austerity faced by our peoples.

And this disconnect has been allowed to grow. No-one in a position of power in Europe has really attempted to communicate with citizens, or present them with a roadmap out of the crisis, or offer them a vision for the future.

Not Van Rompuy, not Barosso, not anyone from the European Parliament.

Why is this?

Why is it that the leaders of the European institutions seem unwilling to speak, or unable to reach European citizens?

Is it because, deep down, they recognise that their mandate is one step removed from the ordinary citizen, and that they are not accepted as their leaders? That in fact the point of reference for citizens is first their national leaders and parliamentarians.

Their failure to communicate is a problem for all those who believe in Europe. It is leading to a rise in anti-European sentiment, a reduction in support for European institutions, a further decrease in engagement in elections pertaining to Europe. In time, it will mean that future referenda on Treaty changes, or on enlargement, or on in-out options, will prove harder to win.

Trust will not be regained until we recognise these issues and work to address them. Some work is already underway to improve the situation. At the Dublin Plenary in June, COSAC welcomed the Commission initiative on next May's European Parliamentary elections.

The elections give us a real opportunity to talk about a vision for Europe, to talk about the *Future of Europe*. But the danger exists that candidates will run local campaigns, arguing for votes on the basis that they will stop Europe from doing something, as opposed to arguing about what they will get Europe to do. There's also the danger that the European elections are seen as a mid-term referendum on the performance of the respective national governments.

So we need to be bold about how these campaigns are undertaken. But what can we do? Well some of the suggestions have already been made by parliaments in their contribution to COSAC's twentieth bi-annual report, contained in your packs.

- We could ban national party logos from all election literature and adverts.
- We could make reimbursement of election funds dependent on having a minimum percentage of literature devoted to European issues.
- We could reduce the numbers of MEPs chosen by party list.

And after the elections we could remove the ability to appoint substitute MEPs. If an MEP resigns or dies a by-election would be held at the time of the next vote in that area (never more than a year or 18 months away anyway!)

We all welcome the proposal that the President of the Commission would come from the largest party in the European Parliament. During the campaign we need the lead candidates of the parties to be fighting from the front, appearing on TV programmes across the Union to spell out their vision for Europe and how their political grouping offers the best prospects for the average European citizen.

Changes such as these will help to improve democratic legitimacy in these institutions.

At a national level, we need to ensure the European roles of National Parliaments are maintained and made more effective.

There are a number of current areas where this can be improved.

Firstly, the system whereby national parliaments make reasoned opinions needs to be used more. As an example, the Commission recently published proposals on the social dimension of the EMU, under which social indicators such as long term unemployment, household disposable income and the like, can be monitored in each country. My Committee will be debating this issue with key organisations in Ireland and using their comments to draft a reasoned opinion on the matter for the EU institutions.

Secondly the procedures in relation to the use of yellow cards and orange cards need to be improved, for instance, in relation to the content and timing of responses from the Commission.

Thirdly, we need to enhance the communication between national parliaments and the Commission, through an increased number of appearances by Commissioners to national parliaments during the European Semester Process - video conferencing would be the minimum standard for this.

Fourthly, we need to see more bi-lateral and multi- lateral meetings between member parliaments. What we are doing here at COSAC is an excellent example of this, and I note the positive response contained within the Bi-annual report in relation to COSAC.

Parliaments need to make greater use of existing tools such as these, but mechanisms will also have to be found in order to adequately address the changing environment.

For instance, in relation to economic governance. National Parliaments need to work with the European Parliament and ensure we maximise the parliamentary architecture to give effect to the political oversight of the new European Semester.

I have to admit that I have found it very strange that the recent COSAC and CSFP Conferences and indeed the Fiscal Compact Conference - the Article 13 Conference - two weeks ago have been in conflict mode. Conflict between the National Parliaments themselves and between the National Parliaments and the European Parliament. I say this because I believe that there must be a better way to make progress on the design of the oversight architecture. We must also ensure that the structures are adequately supported by a functioning secretariat.

I would hope that we can make progress in these areas in the near future, through discussions such as today's.

Friends, we have seen considerable change at the European level in the last decade. Monetary Union, enlargement, pooling of economic sovereignty. Changes have often happened at break-neck speed. The European citizen has not been able to keep up with this pace of change. We need to take stock now, and address how we can win back the trust of our citizens.

Thank you