

SEMINAR

Europe against anti-Semitism for a Union of Diversity

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Speech by Ambassador Barrie Robinson, Ambassador of Ireland to Belgium

Ireland, as Presidency of the European Union much appreciates the opportunity to address this distinguished gathering on the issue of anti-Semitism. We wish to thank President Prodi and the other organisers for taking this timely initiative.

Last December, the European Council expressed its deep concern at the increase of anti-Semitic intolerance in Europe. Anti-Semitism is not solely a European phenomenon, but history imposes a particular responsibility on Europeans to address it effectively.

Our Union is founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. Ours is a Union of diversity. It is made up of different peoples, each proud of its distinctive culture, with a variety of languages and beliefs. All are equal citizens of Europe.

These founding principles must be embedded in our everyday reality and ensure that our Union is one which welcomes diversity, a community built upon tolerance and mutual respect.

We, the citizens of a united and expanding Europe, must be united also in our resolute condemnation of anti-Semitism in all its forms and manifestations. We must recognise that intolerance and bigotry directed against any citizen of the Union is an affront to all. We must actively take all necessary measures to prevent anti-Semitism, and other acts of religious and racial hatred and bigotry. When such phenomena occur, as they do today, they must be confronted vigorously.

History has taught us the horrendous consequences of the failure to act, to stand up for what is right, to prevent atrocities against our fellow man. The Holocaust challenged the very foundations of our civilisation. The pain and suffering inflicted on the many millions of victims of the Holocaust should live in our collective memory and serve to teach us the absolute need for tolerance and respect for our fellow man.

Today, as Europeans, let us make it clear that we abhor all manifestations of anti-Semitism without reservation. Ireland believes that the rejection of anti-Semitism must also be taken up by the international community as a whole. That is why last year we undertook an initiative against anti-Semitism at the United Nations General Assembly. That initiative was supported by all 15 member states, as well as the 10 accession states. While we were unable to achieve the outcome we had hoped for, we believe nevertheless that the initiative served to make clear to all the Union's firm stand against anti-Semitism, and was a useful vehicle for communicating our united views to the wider community of nations.

Ireland believes that the issue of anti-Semitism requires continued consideration by the international community. In this regard, we are pleased that the OSCE will devote a second Conference to anti-Semitism in Berlin in April next.

At last year's OSCE Conference on anti-Semitism, Rudolph Giuliani reminded us "that anti-Semitism is a singular problem. It has its own history; it has a pernicious and distinct history from many prejudicial forms of bias that we deal with". Anti-Semitism uniquely combines elements of both religious and racial intolerance. If we are to eradicate anti-Semitism, we need to address the causes of this phenomenon. It is encouraging that this year's OSCE Conference will focus on the practical measures that can be taken to combat anti-Semitism and promote tolerance.

Of course, responsibility for the prevention of anti-Semitism rests with individuals in the first instance. Governments too have a critical part to play. They must act to adopt and implement effective measures to counter acts of hatred and to promote reconciliation. States must ensure that acts of racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism are not tolerated. There can be no impunity for intolerance and we must persevere in our efforts to ensure that perpetrators of such acts are brought to justice.

In this regard, we have a duty to ensure that our legal systems provide effective guarantees of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief and the right to freedom from discrimination based on race or religion, including providing effective remedies in cases where such rights are violated.

The European Union recognises the importance of education in preparing Europe for a more tolerant and democratic future, and in learning from the past in a positive and constructive way. The challenge of Europe's diverse and multi-cultural societies requires more effective education. It is encouraging to note that a number of current educational programmes at Union level aimed at transmitting the democratic principles and respect for others, the fundamental values on which the Union is founded, incorporate areas on racism and xenophobia.

As I mentioned already, ours is a Union founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. We must recognise that every citizen of the Union needs to strive to attain these goals. I firmly believe that the energetic participation of all actors – States, the United Nations, National Institutions, intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations – is necessary to allow us make progress towards our goal of eliminating all forms of intolerance and racism. Let us strive together to make a tangible change to the daily lives of those experiencing intolerance and discrimination.
