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The coming European Council, the first of the enlarged Union of 25, is to take decisions that will mark the history of the Union and its people against a background of contrasting political events.

Our fellow citizens have just voted in the European Parliament elections. The results should concern us on two counts: because the average rate of participation was very low, in particular in a number of States that have just joined the Union, and because overtly anti-European positions have gained ground.

These two aspects are interrelated. It would be a mistake to explain them solely as the result of a general tendency towards disaffection with politics and a lack of information on the European Union.

The message is plain and simple: many Europeans feel the Union does not come up to their expectations and so they saw no point in voting. Others think the answer lies in falling back on the nation-state, set against Europe.

We must respond to the disenchantment of the former and the illusions of the latter. The answer can only be found by formulating a clear political project that is implemented by effective institutions that can truly take decisions and act.

This is an opportunity we must grasp at this European Council by reaching agreement on a Constitution for Europe.

Politically and symbolically, an agreement on a European Constitution will be a major event in the EU's history, the culmination of the debate we set going at Nice on the future of the Union. Even back then, the Declaration that launched the debate highlighted the need to improve and constantly to ensure the democratic legitimacy and transparency of the Union and the EU institutions and to bring them closer to the people. The Laeken Declaration and the work of the European Convention have brought a result we scarcely hoped for and could barely have dreamt of a few years ago.

But a Constitution and institutions are not an end in themselves: they are there to serve a political project.

We have a duty to show the Constitution is there so the Union can really achieve its goals and act for the benefit of the people. So in this last leg of the journey we must reach political agreement on a European Constitution that is on a par with the ambitions we need to strive for and that meets people's expectations: legitimate institutions that are capable of acting and effective, comprehensible decision-making procedures. The final agreement must be both bold and realistic.

At our meeting, it will be my honour to represent the European Commission for the last time. The exalting mandate entrusted to me five years ago is now nearing its end and much has been done by the Union – the euro, enlargement, a stabler institutional context, the groundwork for an area of freedom, security and justice, and vital economic reforms. But clearly there is still much to do. This will fall to the future President whom you will designate and the European Parliament will approve. Even more than his or her political colour, I earnestly hope you will choose someone who can represent the European general interest, so the Union can be effective and respected, both within and beyond its borders. I know the high expectations that weigh on the President of the Commission. It is for you to give the necessary political signal so those expectations can be met and the tasks this Commission has begun are taken up and continued.

The Constitution will give our fellow citizens a basis of shared values and rights and common objectives. But it will be the task of the institutions to give substance to these aspirations. Work has begun on this, in particular thanks to the determination of the Commission. It is now up to you – together with the new European Parliament and the next Commission – to carry it through.

— *The debate on the Financial Perspective directly concerns the areas where the Union must act and the resources required. The Commission has made proposals with a view to the general interest of the Union and its citizens. As the negotiations on the Commission's legislative proposals will soon enter into a more practical phase, I feel our original aim should be repeated: solidarity on common objectives. Let us look to the future. Going beyond the budget debate, what is at stake is to define the Union's political priorities for the coming years and to give the Union the means to act for the sake of the people – no more, no less. The stakes are high. Let us show we are up to it.*

— *The European Council must also set in motion work to adopt the Tampere II programme in order to consolidate the area of freedom, security and justice. Considerable progress has been made in this field. We must keep up the momentum resolutely.*

— *Growth and job creation continue to be uppermost among the concerns of our fellow citizens and they are essential to support our economy and competitiveness. The High-Level Group chaired by Mr Wim Kok has started work with a view to the mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy next year. This is a cue for giving new meaning to our work in the economic, social and environmental areas.*

— *Lastly, at the European Council the Union will define its geographical and political horizons. Just a few weeks after the accession of ten new member countries, the Union is sending the Balkans a message of hope and openness by recognising Croatia's status as a candidate country. This is difficult and demanding, and the completion of negotiations with Romania and Bulgaria and further work on Turkey's EU candidacy will be too. It must continue to be our goal for the years to come.*

Prime Minister, this last European Council under the Irish Presidency is truly an historic opportunity for Europe to grow stronger and prepare its future. We must grasp that opportunity.