

**Speech by**

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Government**

**at the**

**Sustainable Development Conference**

*Challenges and Opportunities for  
Sustainable Development in EU 25*

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## **Introduction**

Good morning, everyone. I'm delighted to be able to welcome you to Kinsale and to this important conference on *Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Development in EU 25*.

The title of the conference reflects our closeness to Accession Day; it's now only 16 days until we welcome our neighbours and friends from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean into the EU as full and equal partners. We are looking forward very much to the First of May.

While the Accession States will face significant challenges, as Ireland did in the early years of its EU membership, they will also bring a fresh viewpoint and energy to many of the issues facing us all. In line with our overall Presidency theme – Europeans: Working Together, this conference looks at the challenges and opportunities for sustainable development in the new, enlarged Europe.

## **Sustainable Development and the Irish Presidency**

Sustainable development is a central concern of this Irish Presidency. Earlier on this year, we concentrated on the need for a renewed momentum in the environmental dimension of the Lisbon Strategy – so that we can reinforce and exploit the positive synergies between environmental protection and competitiveness. Our Environment Council conclusions on sustainable development provided, I believe, a strong contribution to last month's Spring European Council and set the scene for much of the work that lies ahead. Sustainable development will also inform the OECD Environment Ministerial which I will chair in Paris next week and, of course, provides the global framework for the work of CSD 12 later this month.

As you know, this conference is the third in a series. In The Hague in 2002, you examined National Strategies for Sustainable Development, their development and implementation. In Vienna this time last year, you looked at linking national strategies and strengthening overall European coherence in sustainable development policy.

Here, in Kinsale, you have an opportunity to identify and consider key issues for the upcoming review of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy – the SDS. The Environment Council has asked the Commission to finalise the review by the end of the year, in the perspective of the 2005 mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy.

Alongside the new perspective of the enlarged EU, Ministers have drawn attention to a number of considerations: the desirability of a new sustainable development impetus in Europe, including new sectoral objectives and decoupling targets; better means of measuring progress; building on the results of a stocktaking of the Cardiff environmental integration process; linkage between national and EU strategies; and better coherence between internal and external EU policies and measures.

I'm sure that, from your differing capacities and experiences, many insights, of value to the review, will emerge during your work here.

While the SDS review is the main, overarching theme of the conference, there is also a specific focus on sustainable consumption and production and on communicating sustainable development. In addition, networking and sharing of information on best practices will be important over the next 2 days.

### **A Conference Based on Partnership**

While part of a series, this conference also builds on the earlier events by highlighting the role of civil society in the pursuit of sustainable development. It is being hosted jointly by my own Department and *Comhar*, Ireland's National Sustainable Development Partnership. I welcome the significant representation here from national sustainable development councils, in addition to Government officials responsible for national and international sustainable development policy.

### **Communicating Sustainable Development**

Sustainable development has been described, explained and analysed for many years now. As I see it, the concept at its heart is about a better quality of life for all, now and in the future. It's about managing our relationship with the natural environment so that we can achieve economic prosperity and social progress, while living within our natural means.

The idea is straightforward. The challenges and the opportunities are, of course, substantial.

One challenge we must confront is to communicate better the concept and practice of sustainable development. So it's good that this is to be discussed as a theme in one of the conference workshops. Finding better ways to communicate sustainable development to different audiences is, in my view, fundamental to achieving the fuller buy-in we need to make sustainable development a reality in our economies and societies.

I agree fully with those who call for the revised SDS to be summarised in a single, self-contained document which clearly explains to the citizens of Europe where we are going and how we intend to get there.

### **Ireland's National Sustainable Development Strategy**

Ireland's first National Strategy for Sustainable Development was adopted in 1997 and updated in 2002 for the WSSD. Because of the level of economic growth we have achieved since the mid 1990s, and its real or potential implications for the environment, our focus is mainly on the link between economic activity and pressures on the environment.

Good progress has been made in decoupling energy and materials intensity from economic growth, and in reducing emissions from industry. We now have better river water quality and local air quality, more extensive waste recycling, and our bathing water is of a consistently high quality.

But growing waste, increasing energy consumption, rising greenhouse gas emissions, and transport pressures all highlight the importance of breaking the link between economic growth and damage to the environment. We, like others in Europe, need deeper integration of environmental considerations into the activities of the economic sectors and into our individual lifestyles.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, let me say that, now more than ever, we must - at the global, EU and national levels - rededicate ourselves to getting a better balance between the 3 pillars of sustainable development. We must seek out and exploit areas where the environment and the economy can work hand in hand for mutual benefit.

I hope that the conference will help us all do exactly that.

Finally, I would like to thank all involved in organizing this event - in particular, the European Commission and The Netherlands and UK Governments for their important inputs. We are also grateful to national sustainable development councils for their assistance and support.

I wish you all a stimulating and productive 2 days. And don't forget to enjoy some of great natural beauty around you in this part of the world. Thank you.