

FROM FOUNDING FATHERS TO RELUCTANT EUROPEANS; WHAT HAPPENED TO FRANCE'S EUROPEAN DREAM?

Lecture delivered by Lara Marlowe, France correspondent for *The Irish Times*, to the Association of Franco-Irish Studies annual conference, National Concert Hall Dublin, 23 May 2014

The European project is threatened by public apathy and indifference. It is suffocated by the complexity of EU institutions, thwarted by national egotism, and threatened by the rise of populist, europhobic parties. Exit polls last night showed that Geert Wilders' anti-Europe Freedom Party performed poorly, but we won't know until Sunday night whether europhobe parties will, as predicted, lead the polls in France and Britain.

Over the decades I've lived in Paris, I've watched friends, neighbours and colleagues fall out of love with Europe. In preparing this lecture, I've tried to understand why. For weeks, I've been asking French people how they feel about Europe.

THE DISILLUSIONED

At the National Front's May Day rally, an elderly lady with white hair, a retired accountant, told me how immigrants "invaded" her neighbourhood in Montmartre. "There's no more work; there's nothing," she said. "I want *une Europe choisie* – a chosen Europe. At the very least, I want people who join Europe to be at our level. Our shops are closing because everything is made by the Chinese. I miss the franc terribly. I want us to be sovereign in our own country, not taking orders from Brussels."

A few nights ago, I had dinner with a French businesswoman who votes for centrist, pro-European parties. She's the sort of person you'd expect to embrace the free trade and competition ethos of the EU. But no, she told me: "I have the impression Europe is all about the power of lobby groups in Brussels, that its obsession with uniformity is destroying the souls of our countries."

Member states don't want Europe to take on big issues, but the EU is ridiculed when it deals with small matters. Martin Schulz, the president of the EU Parliament and socialist candidate for the presidency of the next Commission, says Europe "must stop legislating over bottles of olive oil and the size of toilet tanks." He's right.

Statistics published by the EU Commission's Eurobarometer show how dramatically French enthusiasm for Europe has fallen. In 1990, 70 per cent of French people said belonging to the EU was "a good thing." Support began to ebb with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, when people realised they would have to sacrifice a degree of sovereignty to build Europe.

It plummeted further in 2005, when 55 per cent of French voters rejected the Constitutional Treaty. President Nicolas Sarkozy subsequently ignored the will of the majority by pushing the

Lisbon Treaty -- which is virtually identical to the failed Constitution – through parliament for ratification.

Ironically, the Constitutional Treaty was drafted by France's most pro-European former president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Giscard has privately told friends he will not vote in the French EU election on Sunday, because a Europe of 28 member states, where tiny countries have the same say as great powers like France, is unmanageable and meaningless.

In this month's Eurobarometer, only 31 per cent of French respondents say they have a positive image of Europe. From 70 per cent support in 1990, to 31 percent today. Poll results vary, but the downward trend is undeniable.

Similar declines have been registered across the Union. In this month's Eurobarometer, Europe as a whole was only slightly more upbeat than France, with 34 per cent saying they have a positive image of the Union – and substantially less positive than Ireland, where 41 per cent of respondents still view Europe favourably.

Economic crisis is the most obvious explanation for dissatisfaction. It's particularly acute in France, where 87 per cent of the population say the economy is bad (compared to an EU average of 65 per cent). The Eurobarometer shows French distrust of their own government is particularly high, at 80 per cent. If the French liked their own government, they would probably like the EU more too.

As the Nobel prize-winning economist Paul Krugman says, "As long as political leaders have nothing but sacrifice and unemployment to offer their citizens, speeches are pointless."

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE 2005 CONSTITUTIONAL TREATY REFERENDUM

I mentioned the 2005 Constitutional Treaty referendum. It's worth coming back to, because it was the original, trust-destroying sin perpetrated by the French government. I believe that if EU leaders had concentrated more on achieving clear, united policies and concrete projects, instead of obsessing over institutions, treaties and process, people would be less disaffected.

The feeling of betrayal among those 55 per cent of French voters who rejected the Constitution remains intense. They say their universal suffrage was trampled on and swept under the carpet. The pro-Europe MEP Sylvie Goulard compares the No vote to a dead body. It was, she told me, "shoved in the fridge. And they held a foot on the door. It was very unhealthy; like a family secret. They tried to repress it psychologically. But when you repress things they always come back to the surface."

Some countries, like Ireland, have welcomed the opportunities created by globalisation – that is to say the unprecedented mobility of money, people, products and ideas over the last two decades.

For the most part, the French fear globalisation, which they have come to equate with Europeanisation. They see themselves as losers in both processes. Opponents of the

Constitutional Treaty called it the “Trojan horse” or “shoe horn” of globalisation. France’s maverick, left-wing economy minister Arnaud Montebourg even claims it is possible to “de-globalise”.

In a more rational vein, Pascal Lamy, the former head of the World Trade Organisation, gives this analogy: “In globalisation, instead of repairing their boat, the French say, “Let us drain the ocean.”

Opponents of the Constitutional Treaty said a Yes vote was a vote for liberal Europe. France has a unique aversion to economic liberalism, which has replaced capitalism in French parlance.

Similarly, a No vote was deemed a vote for “social Europe,” by the left. They wanted, and still want, a Europe in the French image, with a legally enforced minimum wage and extensive social protection for everyone.

59 per cent of French socialists voted No in 2005. Despite that, Europe has grown more liberal and less social. Now they’re being asked to play the fool’s game again, to vote for socialist candidates on Sunday, again on the pretext that they will be voting for a “social Europe”.

FATHERS OF EUROPE

The French have been divided over Europe since 1763, when Britain defeated France in the Seven Years War, forcing it to accept British colonial predominance outside Europe. A long line of nationalists, including Napoleon and Charles de Gaulle, dreamed of heroism, revenge and sticking it to “*les anglo-saxons*”. Others, starting with Napoleon’s foreign minister Talleyrand, advocated multi-lateralism, cooperation and a European concert of nations.

It was Victor Hugo who first used the phrase “the United States of Europe,” in a speech in 1849. On Europe Day in 2005, just before the failed referendum, I heard Gérard Depardieu read Hugo’s text in the salon de l’Horloge, the very room in the French foreign ministry where Europe was born on May 9, 1950 – about which more in a few minutes.

I cannot imagine Depardieu reading that text, in that place, today. Depardieu has since become a tax exile, was convicted of drink driving, and has just starred in a semi-pornographic film about Dominique Strauss-Kahn.

The present French foreign minister Laurent Fabius was a leader of the No camp that defeated the Constitutional Treaty which Depardieu promoted in 2005. And much of the French political class have become self-hating Europeans, too cautious to allude to a concept as unfashionable as “the United States of Europe”.

I’ll nonetheless read what Victor Hugo said in 1849: “The day will come when we will see two immense groups, the United States of America and the United States of Europe facing one another, holding out their hands across the seas, exchanging their trade, industry, arts, genius...”

I mentioned the birth of Europe in the salon de l'Horloge. The European Coal and Steel Community, the embryo of today's EU, was the brainchild of Jean Monnet. The son of a Cognac dealer, Monnet was a high-ranking official at the League of Nations in the early 1920s. He made a fortune selling alcohol in the US during prohibition, and in high finance. During the Second World War, he persuaded President Franklin D. Roosevelt to launch a massive arms production programme.

In August 1943, Monnet told de Gaulle's government in exile: "There will be no peace in Europe, if the states are reconstituted on the basis of national sovereignty... The countries of Europe are too small to guarantee their peoples the necessary prosperity and social development. The European states must constitute themselves into a federation..."

Monnet wrote the declaration creating the European Coal and Steel Community, which was read by French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman. Schuman's own story mirrored Europe's fraught history. His father had fled Lorraine when Germany annexed Alsace and Lorraine in 1870. Schuman was born in Luxembourg, and became a French citizen only when France regained Alsace-Lorraine at the close of the First World War.

The Coal and Steel Community brought together the six founding members of the European Community: France, West Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg and Italy. Germany's coal and steel production – which were crucial to rebuilding Europe, just five years after the war – were placed under a supranational authority headed by Jean Monnet. Schuman stated clearly that "...this proposal represents the first concrete step towards a European federation, imperative for the preservation of peace."

Monnet and Schuman thus established France's reputation as the cradle of Europe. But as Thierry Chopin, the director of studies at the Robert Schuman Foundation in Paris, pointed out to me, "From the beginning, the French had an ambivalent attitude towards Europe. France has been both an engine of European integration and a brake on it."

The first big setback in European integration occurred in 1954, when the French National Assembly voted against the European Defence Community. It was the middle of the Cold War, and the US wanted Europe to join the fight against communism. But the agreement created a political storm in France because it meant a degree of lost sovereignty, and because it allowed German rearmament.

Nor was Charles de Gaulle, the towering French leader of the 20th century, a convinced European. De Gaulle paralysed the EEC in 1965 by creating the "empty chair crisis" over agricultural policy. He vetoed British membership twice.

In 1965, de Gaulle made what is probably the most famous speech by a French leader about Europe. We are going to show it to you in a moment. For those of you whose French is a little rusty, I'll summarise it first. De Gaulle says: Now that we're all friends in western Europe, it's perfectly normal for us to show solidarity to one another. For de Gaulle, Europe meant only "organised solidarity".

Mocking the federalists who want to create a “United States of Europe”, de Gaulle says, quite comically – and watch for this at the end of the short film clip – “You can jump on your chair like a kid goat saying ‘Europe! Europe! Europe!’ but that leads to nothing and it means nothing.”

“Dès lors que nous ne nous battons plus entre Européens occidentaux, dès lors qu’il n’y a plus de rivalités immédiates et qu’il n’y a pas de guerre, ni même de guerre imaginable, entre la France et l’Allemagne, entre la France et l’Italie, et bien entendu, entre la France, l’Allemagne, l’Italie et l’Angleterre, eh bien! Il est absolument normal que s’établisse entre ces pays occidentaux une solidarité. C’est cela l’Europe, et je crois que cette solidarité doit être organisée. Il s’agit de savoir comment et sous quelle forme.

Alors, il faut prendre les choses comme elles sont, car on ne fait pas de politique autrement que sur les réalités. Bien entendu, on peut sauter sur sa chaise comme un cabri en disant ‘l’Europe! l’Europe! l’Europe!’ Mais cela n’aboutit à rien et cela ne signifie rien.”

THE FEDERALIST ARGUMENT

Today, there are only a handful of self-avowed European federalists left in French politics. Two of the most popular, the green leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Jean-Louis Borloo, leader of the centrist UDI, have just retired from politics. Few pro-Europeans today have the courage to say, as Cohen-Bendit does, that “Building a European identity means surpassing national identity.”

Pro-Europeans in France are under attack by sovereignist euroskeptics like the UMP deputy Henri Guaino, Nicolas Sarkozy’s former speechwriter. Guaino refuses to vote for the leader of his own party’s list in the Paris region, the pro-Europe MEP Alain Lamassoure, on the grounds that Lamassoure “embodies the Europe that nobody wants.”

Federalists resent being asked why they persist in dreaming of a “United States of Europe” despite polls and studies showing that some 70 per cent of Europeans do not want further integration.

Sylvie Goulard, the federalist MEP whom I quoted earlier about the body in the fridge, blames the heads of state and government who have monopolised power for preventing the emergence of an EU that could win the loyalty of its citizens. When I asked her if politicians should ignore the will of the majority to do what is best for Europe, Goulard said, “Yes. Definitely... What people want or don’t want is irrelevant.” Without a more integrated Europe, she argues, member states cannot compete with China, finance their own defence, tackle climate change, fight terrorism or organised crime.

Dominique Reynié, the director of the Foundation for Political Innovation and a professor at Sciences Po, said it’s impossible to know what the French really want, because European federalism is not on offer. “Marine Le Pen’s National Front says loud and clear that they want to leave Europe,” Reynié explains. “People understand that. The pro-Europeans say, ‘We need Europe, but not this Europe – a different one.’”

The French haven't fallen out of love with Europe, Reynié argues. "They've turned against a political class that is incapable of explaining why it has made Europe."

Here's a quote from a European leader, the German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble, that to me epitomises the kind of gobbledygook that Reynié referred to. Dr Schäuble wrote in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper this week that Europe should be "a multilayered democracy: not a federal state... and yet more than a union of states with loose, weakly legitimised binding elements. Europe would be a complementary, interlocked system of democracies of various ranges and competences... a national European double-democracy."

Did you understand that? I didn't.

ENLARGEMENT/FRENCH PREFERENCE FOR SMALL EUROPE

Three weeks ago, Tánaiste and foreign affairs minister Eamon Gilmore marked the tenth anniversary of the "big bang" enlargement of the EU which brought the Union from 15 to 25 members. He said enlargement was positive for Ireland and noted that Irish exports to central and eastern Europe have tripled in the past decade. Ireland exported 4.3 billion euros in goods and services to central and eastern Europe last year – as much as to China and Brazil combined.

In France, the anniversary was scarcely mentioned. Enlargement was never properly explained to the French, and it has been very unpopular, especially the 2007 enlargement to Romania and Bulgaria, with the subsequent influx of tens of thousands of Roma.

The Europe expert Thierry Chopin explains it this way: "The majority of French people prefer a small Europe, because the more Europe enlarges, the less it resembles what France wants... Not only are the east Europeans economic liberals, they're also Atlanticists. The French long wanted Europe to be a counterweight to US power... For economic, political and geopolitical reasons, the French are nostalgic for little Europe – for the Europe of Charlemagne."

In the early days of integration, it was possible to travel to all the capitals of Europe in one day by train. Now, says Bruno Cautrès, who teaches the sociology of EU integration at Sciences Po, "The enlargement of Europe has rendered almost meaningless the question of political and economic integration. Europe is a huge economic space that hasn't managed to become a true political system."

The former European affairs minister Laurent Wauquiez provides a prime example of nostalgia for the Europe of Charlemagne in his new book, titled "Europe: Everything Must Change."

Wauquiez advocates reverting to a core Europe of six EU countries: France, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Italy and Spain. Those are the original countries of the Coal and Steel Community, plus Spain and minus Luxembourg, which Wauquiez dismisses as a haven for money-launderers. When he was European affairs minister, Wauquiez says, "I went to these soulless buildings in Brussels where 28 people sit around a table with 22 interpreters' booths. Everyone talks three minutes. No one listens and nothing moves forward. What is this hell?"

The idea of creating a core Europe around the 18 members of the euro zone is popular in France, advocated, among others, by the economist Thomas Piketty whose book on income inequality – “Capital in the Twenty-First Century” is a best-seller in the US.

Piketty and other signators of the “Manifesto for a political union of the euro” want to pool the debts of the 18 eurozone countries, create a smaller eurogroup parliament alongside the main EU parliament, and chose a permanent president for the eurogroup.

There is also a running debate in France about the *euro fort* – the strong euro – which the socialist government and the National Front blame for the collapse of French exports. Nonsense, say the French right: Germany trades in the same currency, and its exports are thriving. The problem is the lack of French competitiveness.

The far left and far right have used negotiations between the US and Europe on a free trade agreement to scare-monger during the European election campaign. They predict that the big, bad transatlantic market will force Europeans to consume American hormone beef, genetically modified organisms and chicken soaked in bleach.

EFFECTS OF ENLARGEMENT/GERMANY

By pulling the centre of European gravity eastwards, the enlargements of 2004, 2007, and 2013 have increased German influence, says Bruno Cautrès of Sciences Po. East European workers are fuelling German economic growth, by working for low wages in Germany, and in the factories that Germany has built in their countries.

By contrast, many thousands of French jobs have been lost in agriculture, road transport, meat processing and construction, due to the arrival of some 300,000 mostly east European workers under the 1996 EU directive on “posted workers”. In theory, posted workers are temporary, and must be paid the French minimum wage – a rule not often enforced. Moreover, employers pay the much lower social charges applicable in the worker’s home country. This legal undercutting of the French labour market by workers from elsewhere in the EU is one of the chief grievances of the far right-wing National Front.

France had envisioned Europe as a means of containing Germany, only to find that Germany now runs the EU. The impression of a triumphant Angela Merkel is strengthened by Francois Hollande’s feeble leadership. It’s not uncommon to hear disgruntled French politicians label those who admire German success as “collaborators,” an ugly allusion to the Second World War.

At the height of the Greek debt crisis, Arnaud Montebourg, who was not yet France’s economy minister, accused Germany of “building its fortune on our (economic) ruin.” He added that “German nationalism is re-emerging through Madame Merkel’s Bismarck-like policies.” The allusion to Otto von Bismarck, who defeated France in the 1870 Franco-Prussian war, made clear Montebourg’s belief that economic domination is the modern version of German territorial expansion.

For their part, the Germans are exasperated by France's failure to reform or comply with the budgetary rules that Paris voted for. As Alain Juppé, a conservative senior statesman and possible contender for the 2017 French presidential election said this month, "The Germans have no confidence in us and see us as the sick man of Europe."

IRELAND

When Ireland joined the EEC in 1973, at the same time as Britain and Denmark, Garret FitzGerald, then minister for foreign affairs, was so eager to differentiate Ireland from Britain that he spoke French in EU meetings, and asked Irish officials to do the same whenever possible.

France and Ireland have been fast allies on the Common Agricultural Policy, which was the main incentive for Ireland to join Europe. That alliance has continued all the way to the most recent budget negotiations.

Yet France and Ireland have starkly different attitudes towards the desirability of a European defence system, trade, the US domination of the internet – which the French see as a threat to Europe – and corporation tax.

Corporate tax is the only issue over which there has been real tension between France and Ireland. I remember the Jospin government accusing Ireland of "fiscal dumping" back in 2000. Paris has shifted its focus to forcing Google and other internet giants to pay corporate tax in France. But if integration of eurozone economies continues apace, as it has through the economic crisis, harmonisation of corporate tax – and an end to Ireland's 12.5 per cent rate – can be only a matter of time.

IMMIGRATION

Though immigration ceased to be an issue in Ireland about a decade ago, Europe's failure to stem illegal immigration is a volatile issue in France. On Wednesday, the former President Nicolas Sarkozy advocated suspending the Schengen agreement on freedom of movement. More than half the French television debate on the European elections last night was devoted to immigration.

The case of 15 year-old Leonarda Dibrani, a Roma schoolgirl who was expelled with her family to Kosovo last year, typifies the debate in France. Francois Hollande's attempt to please everyone by saying Leonarda could return to France, but without her family, felt flat.

Days before the European election, the National Front has seized on a press report saying the Dibranis may obtain Croatian nationality and thus return to France (since Croatia joined the EU last year) as proof that Schengen and the EU promote the settlement of undesirables in France.

Eight months after 350 Africans drowned off the coast of Lampedusa, immigration is a political time bomb which the EU and governing political parties are at a loss to deal with. The means devoted by the EU to controlling immigration are derisory: 300 Frontex agents and 89 mn euros

annually. That's 0.4 per cent of the \$24 bn the US spends on its 63,000 border guards and 50,000 coast guards.

Europe's 28 heads of state and government twice postponed any political decision on immigration policy until after this week's elections.

FOREIGN AND DEFENCE POLICY

In foreign and defence policy too, Europe finds it hard to exist. The Ukrainian crisis has shown the limits of the foreign policy which the 2009 Lisbon Treaty was supposed to create. One can argue that the EU helped to create the crisis in the first place. The 28 EU members have no problem denouncing Russia's annexation of Crimea and the referendums in eastern Ukraine. But the moment there's a question of punishing Russia, all semblance of unity dissolves.

The EU's performance in the Central African Republic, where Muslims and Christians have been massacring each other for more than a year, shows how little progress has been made towards an EU defence policy. As Daniel Cohn-Bendit said this month, "There are 1.8 mn soldiers in uniform in Europe, but we can't find 70,000 to go to the Central African Republic?" It took four months of French pleading for the EU to finally agree to send 800 soldiers to Bangui last month.

For as long as I have covered France for The Irish Times, a total of 14 years, French politicians have portrayed Europe as a multiplier of French power; as President Francois Hollande put it this month, "a way of weighing on the fate of the world."

The previous socialist president, Francois Mitterrand, said he wanted "a strong France in a strong Europe." Instead, the French perceive a weak France in a weak Europe.

CULTURE

Eamon Maher originally asked me to talk about convergence between French and Irish culture, which would have been more in keeping with the other papers presented here. I savoured the thought of doing research on George Moore, Roderic O'Connor, Joyce and Beckett...

Then I realised that I was scheduled to speak to you in the midst of elections to the European Parliament. I decided to kill two birds with one stone by delving into disaffection with Europe for my newspaper and the AFIS conference at the same time.

Before closing, I would like to say a few words about culture though, because I believe it is possibly the most powerful and unrecognised force holding Europe together.

The Austrian Jewish writer Stefan Zweig was a great chronicler of Europe from the turn of the last century until his suicide during the Second World War. In 1932, Zweig published a small book titled "Appeal to the Europeans," in which he argued for European integration through culture. Europeans should teach culture – not political and diplomatic history – to their children, Zweig wrote. "The history of wars leads youths to admire violence. The history of culture teaches them respect for the mind."

Zweig was a federalist precursor of Monnet, Schuman and Cohn-Bendit. “As long as the European idea has not taken a fundamentally visible form, capable of inspiring enthusiasm; as long as it has not become a kind of patriotism and supra-nationalism for individuals, it is condemned to sterility and will not manage to transform itself into reality,” he wrote.

“Does European culture exist?” was the title of an excellent article by my colleague Enda O’Doherty in the Dublin Review of Books, which he edits, and which you can read online. O’Doherty debunked the assertion of the Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller that there is no such thing as European culture. He listed the Europe-wide movements that prove the contrary: the centuries-long use of Latin by the educated across Europe; Gothic architecture; Renaissance art; the Enlightenment; Romanticism. “The interconnectedness was so strong and so long-lasting that the notion that there has never been anything other than national musics, national literatures, national traditions of painting is little short of an absurdity,” O’Doherty concludes.

THE UPBEAT ARGUMENTS

Peace and prosperity attributed to the EU are the main arguments politicians use in the hope of endearing it to the public. The generation who remember the Second World War is dying out, but the achievement of the longest period of peace in European history nonetheless remains a powerful argument. The latest Eurobarometer shows 55 per cent of the French rank peace among EU members as the most positive accomplishment of the EU.

And Europe has arguably created prosperity, though it’s difficult to convince citizens of that at the moment. Jean-Dominique Giuliani, the head of the Robert Schuman Foundation, has just published a book titled “How and why Europe will remain the heart of the world.” Giuliani notes that Europe represents 20 per cent of the world’s wealth, and 42 per cent of trade on the planet. It receives 30 per cent of global investments. The euro is the world’s second reserve currency, after the dollar.

And despite its reputation as a bastion of liberal economics, Europe is among the highest achievers when judged by the UN’s human development indicators: in terms of life expectancy, access to education and -- except for Romania and Bulgaria -- per capita GDP. Europe’s medical care and expenditure on social programmes are unrivalled. Europe is, Giuliani notes, the continent with the least inequality.

Yet all these positives fail to add up to a vision for the future. There is no consensus on what Europe should be, and its leaders often work at cross purposes. It is ironic that David Cameron has promised a referendum on pulling out of Europe at a time when the British preference for a vast free trade zone is the one that prevails, and English – not French – is the language of Europe.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau defined democracy as what occurs “when sufficiently informed people deliberate.” In the EU, people are not sufficiently informed, and they rarely deliberate. In a recent Harris poll, 75 per cent of French respondents said they do not understand EU institutions.

Europe has invented its own acronym-packed language. In a cabinet meeting before a recent European Council, Francois Hollande reportedly turned on his ministers and advisors, waving the briefing paper they'd given him: "What is this jibberish?" he demanded. "I don't understand a word of it, so how do you expect our partners to understand it?"

The problem is compounded in France by a difference of political culture. "The French don't understand negotiated compromise," says Thierry Chopin of the Robert Schuman Foundation. "For them, compromise means to compromise oneself. Europe is a permanent compromise. German political culture is based on compromise." Furthermore, "The EU parliament doesn't function on the basis of a left-right divide. That is incomprehensible to the French."

If Europe is to begin to win back the loyalty of its citizens, heads of state and government must loosen their grip on decision-making, and stop the back-room horse-trading that has characterised the EU until now. The way in which the next president of the Commission is chosen will be a major test of their willingness to do so. The new Commission that will take office in the autumn needs to focus less on imposing austerity and sacrifice, more on helping people. And the Union as a whole – like France itself – desperately needs what Hollande calls a "shock of simplification".

French politicians must stop blaming "Brussels" for their own incompetence. They must show the importance of Europe by sending their best diplomats and politicians to Brussels, as Ireland has long done. And they need to engage in meaningful, public debate on issues people care about – the "posted workers" from poorer EU states who take French jobs; the presence of Roma encampments around Paris, Lille and Lyon. Until or unless they do, such issues are a godsend to the National Front.

Most of all – and this may be the biggest challenge for any politician – French and European leaders need to elaborate a discourse that creates MEANING and a sense of direction, for their own countries, and for this precious and perishable undertaking that is the European Union.

(ENDS)