

What is the European Youth Parliament about? Andrew Byrne offers some insights and claims that Europeans share for more in common than realised.

# We must all play our part in meeting Europe's challenges

Members of the European Youth Parliament will hold debates today in the Dáil. Head organiser **Andrew Byrne** explains what it is all about

Europe at 50 and beyond is the theme of the European Youth Parliament 56th International Session which has been taking place in Ireland since November 9th. Today and tomorrow, delegates take over the Dáil.

This event provides an opportunity for the young people involved in the Parliament to look to the future and highlight the challenges that Europe will face in the next 50 years. More than 300 people from more than 30 countries across Europe are participating in a range of debates and seminars.

The core topics of discussion will be climate change; the energy crisis; Europe's role in the world - its foreign policy, its development aid policies and its handling of immigration issues. Participants will work in committees throughout the course of the session based on these topics, and their proposals will then be debated and voted on and then approved by General Assembly.

The resolutions and suggestions that the students devise in their work will be being sent to all of the TDs and Senators, European Commissioners, and Members of the European Parliament.

One topic we will not be debating formally (though I am sure it will feature in informal discussion) is: how do we get people interested? How do we make people interested in their EU citizenship and all that it entails?

One of the key questions that has to be addressed is how informed is the average European citizen? Despite people's general awareness of our European status, there appears to be a lack of knowledge of the European institutions, policies and, more importantly, on the various treaties and how they subsequently affect us.

We are trying to address this issue in the European Youth Parliament by inspiring young people to "think big" on the challenges that Europe faces in the next 50 years. If you look at the challenge of climate change, it is our generation that is going to have to deal with the cost of inaction today. There is a great sense of urgency here that more needs to be done about this issue immediately.

But in a sense we are preaching to the converted, because by simply taking part every young person gets to see the European ideal. You can't work, argue and laugh with 300 young Europeans without coming away with a real sense of yourself, as not just Irish or French or Serb or Croat, but as part of something bigger; that as well as your national identity and the pride you have in it, you have a European identity and a shared set of concerns, hopes and fears.

I am beginning to suspect that more important than the policies we discuss, or the recommendations we make, is what we will learn from each other. That Europe is not just about politics and policy, bureaucracy and directives - it is fundamentally about people. People who share a common set of values, striving to put these values into action to address common challenges we all face as Europeans.

For all of the national differences, we Europeans share far more in common than we realise. Taking part in an event such as the European Youth Parliament drives that point home with more force than a year of academic study.

If every European citizen had a similar experience we would not see the level of apathy we see when the word "Europe" is mentioned.

I certainly hope that the recommendations we make will feed into

public policy and make a tangible difference to the way in which Europe meets the challenges ahead.

The challenges cannot be met by individual nation states; we can and must work together. Politics is too important to be left to just politicians or policy to bureaucrats, we the people must play our part in meeting Europe's challenges.

*Andrew Byrne is president of the Trinity College students union*