

Celebrating fifty years of peace, prosperity and progress

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FIFTY years ago this Sunday, the grand Orazi and Curiazi Hall of the Capitoline Museum in Rome provided the setting for a meeting that has shaped modern Europe as no other since the end of the Second World War.

In the shadow of ornate frescoes depicting Rome's historic bloody battles, the like of which had torn Europe apart for centuries, European leaders agreed a path they hoped would ensure such conflict would never again ravage our continent. The Treaty of Rome, as it has become known, created the European Economic Community (EEC) and laid the foundations for today's EU.

This weekend, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of that historic moment and the resulting half century of peace, prosperity and progress. Indeed the EU is remarkable in that it has successfully achieved its aim - it has allowed countries to set aside national differences in order to build a common future.

Of course, this weekend's anniversary is also a chance for us to take stock - to reflect on the EU's achievements so far and consider the challenges ahead.

In any reasoned opinion, the successes of the European Union are impressive. The EU has given us the largest single market in the world, social and environmental standards higher than anywhere else, and unrivalled standards of democracy, human rights and protection of minorities.

On global issues such as Kyoto and the International Criminal Court it is the EU that has taken the international lead, and the EU is the world's biggest donor of international aid - providing 55% of all assistance to developing countries.

Meanwhile, at home, EU structural funds have helped transform Europe's poorest regions - including Wales. Even so, as an MEP I am often asked by my constituents - but what has Europe actually done for me?

Well, over the past seven years Euro funding has generated a total investment of around £3 billion in the Welsh economy, supporting the creation of 40,500 new jobs and 1,900 new businesses. And the benefits to us in Wales don't end there.

For workers in Wales Europe has enshrined the right to four weeks holiday pay, rights for part-time and fixed-term workers and proper standards of health and safety protection. For women, European laws ensure equal pay, protection from sex discrimination, and the right to 26 weeks of maternity leave.

For consumers, there is clearer food labelling, protection from the most dangerous chemicals, and plans to slash the price of using mobile phones in Europe. For tourists, free medical help across Europe, compensation for passengers suffering air delays and laws that make it easier to buy a holiday home in Spain or France.

For our environment and culture the EU Blue Flag scheme means we have far cleaner beaches, targets for CO2 reduction, recycling and reducing landfill, and protection for minority languages - including Welsh.

For young people an integrated Europe has opened new worlds and opportunities for travel. Indeed, more than 1 million youngsters have taken part in the EU ERASMUS student exchange programme. And let's not forget that it is the eastern European workers - here through EU enlargement - that are filling crucial vacancies in our manufacturing, agriculture and service industries.

The success of the EU can be measured by counting those countries queuing and aspiring to become members. In 2004 10 new members were brought into the EU fold and in January this year, Bulgaria and Romania added their names to the list. Today, Serbia, Croatia and Turkey are among the countries eagerly working to meet the EU's entry criteria.

For these Balkan states in particular, but for all Europe also, the fundamental reasons for the creation of the EU - the desire for peace and prosperity - remain as relevant today as they ever were. Indeed, in today's globalised world, few problems stop at national borders and we are all interdependent, whether we like it or not. Climate change, energy security, terrorism and economic competitiveness all require us to work together.

When the founding fathers of the EU met around that table in Rome half a century ago it is unlikely they would have envisaged the success their creation would achieve, or the very different challenges that it now faces. Nevertheless, though the challenges may have changed, the founding principle remains. Today, as in 1957, we can achieve more working together than we can alone.

Eluned Morgan is MEP for Wales