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Istituto Affari Internazionali

Why Europe Matters More Than Ever

by Bobby McDonagh

After four very enjoyable years as Ireland's Ambassador in Rome I will be returning to Dublin this summer. Having spent two decades involved in European negotiations, I am delighted to add my voice to the ongoing debate about Europe's future.

Almost every day I have taken an early morning walk through Rome. One of my favourite walks takes me from the Gianicolo, where I live, to the Campidoglio. Leaving my residence, I go down the steps to Trastevere, across the Isola Tiberina and over to the Campidoglio to a vantage point from which I can look down across the Roman Forum. There, I allow myself a few minutes to reflect. It gives me a sense of perspective. I then return home, skirting Piazza Venezia and through the Jewish quarter back to the Gianicolo.

A few weeks ago, a thought struck me quite forcefully. Namely the reminders

of death, destruction and suffering which haunt almost every step of this journey.

The Embassy residence itself was Giuseppe Garibaldi's headquarters in 1849 as he defended the Roman Republic. During that bloody campaign, many men were killed in the very house where I now live. A few steps down Via Garibaldi is the Memorial to those who died in the 19th century defence of Rome; the ossuary contains the bones of many, including an eleven year old drummer boy. Then immediately on the left is the church of San Pietro in Montorio which contains the remains of Hugh O'Neill who led Irish forces in the 16th century war against Queen Elizabeth I in which 130,000 people are estimated to have died.

In Trastevere, which witnessed many Christian persecutions, there is a plaque commemorating the locals who died resisting German occupation. Heading

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towards the old Roman citadel one thinks of the many sackings of Rome – by Vandals, Visigoths and Gauls. Approaching the Campidoglio, the statue of Cola di Rienzo reminds us of the casualties of his 14th century revolt. Then looking down over the Forum one can see the Via Sacra running from the triumphal arch of Titus, built in honour of his defeat of the Jewish people, to the arch of Septimius Severus whose military adventures stretched from the Tigris River to Scotland. One thinks of all the other generals who over the centuries, to borrow Shakespeare's words, "Cried havoc and let slip the dogs of war"; not least Julius Caesar in whose Gallic wars hundreds of thousands died.

On my return journey, from the edge of Piazza Venezia one can see the eternal flame in memory of the unknown soldier and the balcony from which Mussolini stirred up more trouble; reminders of the two great wars of the last century. In the distance Trajan's Column commemorates the Dacian wars in which hundreds of thousands of young men died. Just ahead is the house where Napoleon's mother lived. I wonder if she occasionally spared a thought for Austerlitz, Moscow and Waterloo.

On my way home through the Jewish quarter, small gold cobblestones outside some houses record the names of individual Jews who were rounded up and transported to the gas chambers. A reminder that each person who died in the wars across the centuries was an individual. Recently I noted the inscription on one of the cobblestones in Via Arenula: *Giorgina Guglielma*

Coen. Born 1888. Arrested 16 October 1943. Deported to Auschwitz. Murdered 23 October 1943.

These sad layers of history are no reflection on this great city. On the contrary, the fact that memories of such suffering are embroidered into the history of the Eternal City, synonymous with great art, faith and civilisation, merely underlines the universal nature of the human capacity for destruction.

To recall that Ireland and Italy are today European partners is both a profound reality and a call to action. The EU, which so rightly won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012, is a necessarily complex, necessarily delicate, necessarily imperfect construction. Defending it, while seeking of course to improve it, is not a whimsical option amongst others but one of the great moral imperatives of our day. That its importance is so obvious does not mean it was inevitable. That we take it for granted does not mean its future is guaranteed.

There is only one EU, the imperfect and extraordinary one that we have today. If this EU were to disappear under the onslaught of scepticism or – equally dangerous – burdened by the unrealistic expectations of well-meaning perfectionists, there will be no Union in its place. If anyone wonders what, over time, would take the place the EU they might like to join me on my morning walk.

Ireland and Italy have a deeper friendship today than ever before, no longer distant admirers but close partners. The fundamental reason for this is our shared membership of the EU.

Sharing the single market is important. But Europe is much more than a market. It is common institutions. The election of democratic representatives to the same parliament. Acceptance of the same rule of law. Working together to promote consistently decent values in the wider world. Doing business on the basis of shared objectives, agreed procedures, mutual respect and fair compromises.

The relationship between Ireland and Italy, modest in global terms, is important in a world which knows more hostility than friendship, more confrontation than compromise. It is a significant building block in constructing a safer more interconnected world. Fortunately, the EU has many more building blocks. In total, between all of the individual EU Member States, there are 377 bilateral relationships, a rich and complex tapestry of friendships in a world which often seems to be unravelling; a tapestry of treaties and laws, of respect and accommodation, that provides the basis for continued stability and prosperity on our continent and allows us together to play a constructive role in the wider world in support of human rights, the rule of law, free trade, conflict prevention and in the vital struggles against climate change and development challenges.

The Irish people remain overwhelmingly committed to the European project. Brexit will pose big challenges for us. However, we draw confidence from the immense support which we have received from our partners; in particular, their support in finding creative solutions to ensure that

Brexit does not undermine the Northern Ireland peace process for which the EU has provided both generous support and the necessary context.

The world is facing a growing challenge from populism and narrow nationalism. This populism is a rejection of four things: complexity, compromise, diversity and the inevitability of imperfection.

The populists preach that there are simple and perfect solutions to the world's problems, that they can have their cake and eat it and that those who are different are to be feared. No wonder they cannot stand the EU. Europe will always be complex, not least because the simple ways have consistently and tragically failed. It knows in its bones that compromise is not a dirty word. It is forged out of diversity. It recognizes the imperfection at the heart of every human enterprise. Yet, against great odds, it has constructed delicate and subtle institutions and mechanisms which are capable of softening and reconciling those imperfections.

For these and many more reasons, the European Union matters more than ever before. Its continued success is essential not only for this generation but for the generations to come.

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Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, IAI does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economy and international security. A non-profit organisation, the IAI aims to further and disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are: European institutions and policies; Italian foreign policy; trends in the global economy and internationalisation processes in Italy; the Mediterranean and the Middle East; defence economy and policy; and transatlantic relations. The IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (The International Spectator), an online webzine (Affarinternazionali), two series of research papers (Quaderni IAI and IAI Research Papers) and other papers' series related to IAI research projects (Documenti IAI, IAI Working Papers, etc.).

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