PRESS RELEASE

Address by Liam Connellan, Director General, Confederation of Irish Industry, at CII Mid-West Regional Council Lunch at University Club, Plassey House, University of Limerick, on Tuesday, 5th March 1991 at 1.00p.m.

NEED TO HAVE 50% OF LEAVING CERTIFICATE PUPILS STUDYING GERMAN BEFORE THE END OF THE DECADE

The unification of Germany is giving a powerful stimulus to economic growth on the Continent. The economic centre of gravity of Europe has moved eastwards. At the same time the process of European economic, monetary and political integration is gathering pace. These developments highlight the need for much closer integration of the Irish economy with that of Continental Europe which now accounts for over 80% of the buying power of the European Community.

Continental markets offer very substantial opportunity for the sale of Irish goods and services. However, this will not be a passive development. It will happen because we in Irish industry make use of the opportunities of open access to larger and more rapidly expanding markets, and will need the strong support of essential State services, particularly in the areas of education and training.

Already half of total Irish exports are sold on the Continent. Last year tourism receipts from mainland Europe were higher than those from the United States for the first time. Mainland Europe now accounts for almost a third of all inward investment projects, about a fifth of outward investment made by Irish firms, and a similar proportion of our young graduates are now going to the Continent for initial work experience.

However, I believe that before the end of this decade at least half of all our total business activities whether trade, investment, tourism or traded services, should be related to Continental Europe, and that as a result it will be possible to achieve a faster rate of growth in output and employment in Ireland than in the past.

It is vitally important that all of us whether as industrialists, educationalists, parents or students, should recognise fully the changes which are taking place in Ireland's relationship with Continental Europe, and act accordingly. The pace of growth can be accelerated if industry, and the public agencies, coordinate their efforts. One of the greatest constraints is our lack of proficiency in Continental languages. There are far too few people in our businesses, hotels and shops with a knowledge of modern Continental languages. It is still rare for visitors to be greeted in their mother tongue. We seem to be convinced that everyone can speak English. This just is not so. It is a truism that one can buy products in any language but sell them only in the language of one's customer.

For many years the Confederation has been calling for a greater emphasis on the teaching of German in our schools. Germany is our second largest trading partner and our fastest growing major market, and our largest Continental investment and tourism market. Almost 100 million people in Europe now speak German as their mother tongue. Germany is potentially the largest single market for Irish products and services in the Community. It is disappointing that so little progress has been made in the teaching of German in Irish secondary schools over the last decade. Ten years ago only 4% of Leaving Cert students took German at Leaving Cert level. Today this percentage has increased only to 6%. I would urge that a target should now be set that 50% of all secondary school students will sit for the Leaving Cert in German before the end of the decade thus reflecting the growing importance of Irish links with the Federal Republic.

An increase in the proportion of Leaving Cert students taking German to 50% would bring about a substantial improvement in our ability to communicate with our largest potential customer, and in this way increase the opportunities for employment in industry, tourism and services which are traded with the Federal Republic. A greater knowledge of the German language will increase the attraction of Ireland for German investment. It will increase the attraction of Ireland as a source of goods and services. It will increase the attraction of Ireland as a holiday destination.

Ireland has many advantages. In particular, our youthful population makes it easier for us to adapt more rapidly to the changes which are now taking place in Europe and in that way to provide more employment for our people. This capacity must be fostered. I would, therefore, strongly urge that a crash programme be introduced in our secondary school which will ensure that a target of 50% of students taking the Leaving Certificate in German is achieved by the end of this decade.

END 5.3.1991