

Dr. Athanase Lavidas, Vice Chairman of the Board, Head of International Affairs, SEV

Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Dear Members of SEV,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am particularly proud to welcome on behalf of SEV Dr Gareth Fitzgerald, former Prime Minister of Ireland, who left a marking imprint, not only on the Irish Republic but on European politics as well. And I would like to extend to him and to all our Irish friends here today, our warmest congratulations on Saint Patrick's Day, the national Day of Ireland.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's world has changed dramatically over the past few years. Recession, due to a unique global crisis, is spilling over into the real economy. Enterprises are facing lower demand, both domestically and internationally, unemployment has increased, credit has been drying up. All stakeholders involved, policy makers and social partners, have a duty to secure the improvement of the fundamentals of our economies.

Our country is at a turn point. The most severe Global economic crisis has brought forward long-standing problems and unaddressed deficiencies in our system. Greece is now facing a challenge of major magnitude, certainly the most important, since we became members of the European Union. How we deal with it collectively, becomes a crucial test for our future.

Drastic measures are being taken, and their painful effects are already evident. The necessity to address the fiscal mechanism and control public sector spending, is being well understood by the Greek society. **The real challenge, however, lies in the opportunity that exists to reform past practices, restructure procedures, improve competitiveness and achieve higher productivity. We have to re-launch the economy and re-shape the business environment, which will allow creating new prospects and new jobs. But most of all we have to change our mentality, the way we see and react on issues at hand.**

The Greek business community, with its creative, flexible and international-minded identity, remains a key element for success in this respect. **We, at SEV, support the efforts undertaken by the government, and we offer our proposals and assessments. We are also very keen to promote useful discussion and foster dialogue on the challenging problems Greece is facing. And the presence today of a Statesman, like Dr. Fitzgerald, provides an extremely appropriate opportunity to listen and draw conclusions.**

St. Patrick's Day, Grand Bretagne, March 19th 2010

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Countries that have been at the same crossroads in the past and managed to overcome their problems, can offer a most useful example for Greece today. Even though circumstances and context might not be the same, important conclusions can be drawn from the Irish experience and, if readjusted, applied to our benefit. Ireland has previously faced a situation, in which fiscal challenges and low competitiveness coincided. **The Irish people successfully overcame them, executing steadily and effectively a well-defined strategy that combined fiscal consolidation and reform of product market regulations.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we say in the business world, “every threat is an opportunity”. The Greek society is called to face current challenges, define obstacles, learn from previous experiences and from others who have managed to lead their way out of the crisis. We should take advantage of the unique strengths of this beautiful country and its entrepreneurial community, that has contributed significantly to the progress of Greece, nationally and globally. **The opportunities lay ahead us, in so many sectors. And just to mention a few, in green activities, renewable energy, shipping, construction, tourism and culture. We should focus on markets that can assure development and growth and can allow us to build a better future for all Greek citizens and fellow Europeans. The time is now ; let's not miss it.**

With these words, I would like to thank Dr. Fitzgerald for his presence here today and we look forward to hearing him sharing with us his valuable experience, resolutions and thoughts.

Thank you.

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