

## **Sixty this year, so get those candles lit!**

I'll be sixty this year, which means that I share a birthday with the European Union (although it wasn't called that then). As you get older, 'significant birthdays' (those ending in a zero) lead you to consider what you've achieved and all the changes that have occurred in your lifetime. When I started thinking back, I realised that many developments were directly due to the EU.

So much has changed that childhood memories become hazy. Sure, there are the obvious changes, like computers, the internet and social media, but the first thing I thought of is how our diet has changed. When I think back to the food my mum used to make in the sixties, I realise that we had never heard of pizzas, pasta or pita, or of peppers or aubergines, come to that. As much of the fresh fruit and vegetables we eat today cannot be grown locally, our only option was to eat tinned varieties. More trade between EU countries has greatly enriched our eating habits.

And that trade has brought with it something far more precious: peace. I don't know about you, but I couldn't imagine the Western European countries going to war today, and the Eastern European countries that have joined the EU are bound to grow closer to each other and the rest of us. We take all that for granted, but we should remember that this has been the longest period in Western European history without a war. That is a real achievement.

One of the great peace dividends is that we can all travel around more easily, experiencing new places and cultures without encountering problems at borders and often without even having to exchange currencies. In my day, studying abroad was in its infancy, but now schemes like Erasmus make it so much simpler for young people to learn about different ways of life. The opportunity to live in other EU countries makes it easier to learn languages, which is the key to really getting to know people. At the same time, technological progress now enables us to stay in touch with our families more easily, especially now that roaming charges have been abolished in the EU.

With more people studying abroad, the EU has arranged for qualifications to be mutually recognised throughout Europe, so people can work wherever they like. I have friends working in Paris, Vienna and Athens, and I myself have lived and worked in four EU countries. My parents' generation could only dream of such freedom. Both I and the EU can be proud of turning sixty!