



## Czech President Václav Klaus questions ever closer European political integration in speech to the European Parliament

The Lisbon Treaty would worsen the EU's democratic deficit, argued Czech President Klaus in a speech to the EP, in which he questioned the role of the EP itself. EP President Pöttering responded by describing Mr Klaus's views as "an expression of the diversity in Europe" and pointed out that "in a democracy it's the view of the majority that counts". Without the EP, Europe would be in the hands of bureaucrats, he cautioned. A wide majority of MEPs strongly welcomed Mr Pöttering's response.

President Klaus, addressing a formal sitting of the House in Brussels in his role as head of state of the country holding the EU's six-month rotating presidency, chose to speak on what he called "issues of extraordinary importance for the further development of the European integration project".

The Czech Republic, he said, knew full well that when it joined the EU "it was not a utopian construction, put together without authentic human interests, visions, views and ideas". He added "for us there was and there is no alternative to European Union membership". "We have therefore been really hurt by the repeated and growing attacks we have been facing; attacks based on the unfounded assumption that the Czechs are searching for some other integration project than the one they became members of five years ago. This is not true".

The key tasks of European integration, said the Czech president, were "to remove unnecessary - and for human freedom and prosperity counterproductive - barriers to the free movement of people, goods, services, ideas..." and "a joint care of public goods at continental level".

### Decision-making in Brussels not always best, says Czech President

However, he then questioned whether decision-making in Brussels was always the best way to achieve these goals, and asked MEPs "are you really convinced that every time you take a vote, you are deciding something that must be decided here in this Chamber and not closer to the citizens, i.e. inside the individual European states?".

Developing his theme, Mr Klaus explained that while there was no alternative to EU membership, "the methods and forms of European integration do, on the contrary, have quite a number of possible and legitimate variants". Moreover, "claiming that the status quo, the present institutional form of the EU, is forever uncriticisable dogma, is a mistake", as is the assumption that "there is only one possible and correct future for

European integration, which is 'ever-closer Union'".

Any given institutional arrangement should be seen merely as a means to the ends of "human freedom and an economic system that brings prosperity", with a market economy being the key tool for achieving this.

## **No real opposition in the European Parliament, says Klaus**

The Czech President argued that "the present decision-making system in the European Union is different from a classic parliamentary democracy, tried and tested by history. In a normal parliamentary system, part of the MPs support the government and part support the opposition. In the European Parliament this arrangement has been missing. Here only one single option is being promoted and those who dare think about a different option are labelled enemies of European integration."

In addition, he continued, there is "a great distance (not only in a geographical sense) between citizens and Union representatives, which is much greater than inside the Member countries. This distance is often described as the democratic deficit, the loss of democratic accountability" and in Mr Klaus' view, "the proposals to change the current state of affairs - included in the rejected European Constitution or in the not very different Lisbon Treaty - would make this defect even worse".

Warming to his theme, the president maintained "Since there is no European *demos* - and no European nation - this defect cannot be solved by strengthening the role of the European Parliament either". (*Note: At this point a number of MEPs walked out of the Chamber*)

Mr Klaus believed that "attempts to speed up and deepen integration" could "endanger all the positive things achieved in Europe in the last half a century" and he urged that the situation must not be allowed "where the citizens of Member countries would live their lives with a resigned feeling that the EU is not their own, that it is developing differently than they would wish, that they are only forced to accept it".

## **Priority to the market economy**

Turning to economic aspects, he argued that "the present economic system of the EU is a system of a suppressed market, a system of a permanently strengthening centrally controlled economy" and called instead for "liberalisation and deregulation of the European economy".

## **Free debate the best way to solve disagreement**

Concluding the Czech President told the House "I say all of this because I do feel a strong responsibility for the democratic and prosperous future of Europe", adding "the most important task is to make sure that free discussion about these problems is not silenced as an attack on the very idea of European integration".

## **EP President responds**

In his introduction, Parliament's President Hans-Gert Pöttering had described the Czech nation as being historically "the beating heart of European thinking". He highlighted the approval of the Lisbon Treaty, by a large majority, in the Lower House of the Czech Parliament earlier this week and he also praised Mr Klaus as an "advocate of a free, effective market economy".

After Mr Klaus had delivered his speech, Mr Pöttering responded by saying that Mr Klaus was only able to speak in this way because "we live in European democracy where everyone can express his or her own opinion. In a *"Parliament of the past"* you wouldn't have been able to give this speech". He thanked the Czech president for his visit, describing it as "an expression of the diversity in Europe" but pointed out that "in a democracy it's the view of the majority that counts".

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