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SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT, MR PAT COX



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SPEECH

delivered by the President of the European Parliament,

Mr Pat COX

to the Informal European Council

on 16 April 2003

in Athens

As delivered

Mr President,

The enlargement is on track. I am proud to report to you that last Wednesday, the European Parliament voted by huge majorities to accept the applications for membership of the Union from the 10 Accession States. On average, more than 90% of MEPs voted for this enlargement. All the votes were higher, numerically and proportionately, than for previous enlargements. The coming year marks a new phase in the enlargement process. Peoples, through referendums, and Parliaments, through their ratification procedures, now decide. The work at the European level is concluded.

So far, three referendums in the Accession States (Malta, Slovenia and Hungary) gave the lead. In the name of the Parliament, I congratulate their leaders on these results. But important tests lie ahead. I would also ask you to ensure that the national parliaments, particularly in the Member States, meet the ratification timetable, so that we may meet the 1 May 2004 deadline.

The courageous reforms - economic, political and social - that the Accession States have made since the fall of the Berlin Wall, building democracy and market economies, and adopting the *acquis communautaire*, have involved sacrifices, courage and patience.

The Convention, with the participation of the Accession countries, which is our contribution to the reform process, is vital and indispensable, in order to make a Europe of 25 Member States work. We, too, must demonstrate courage and a mature capacity for compromise.

In October 2000, even before the conclusion of the Treaty of Nice, Parliament voted in principle in favour of a Constitution for Europe and called for the establishment of a Convention. Many felt our position was Utopian. Gradually, many recognised that a Convention was desirable. After Nice, we all became convinced that it was a necessity.

And the Convention method is working. It has stimulated public debate. It has allowed conclusions to be drawn, in many instances more radical than the results of Amsterdam and Nice. It has been open. *La mayonnaise a pris*.

There is widespread agreement on the form of the outcome: a Constitutional Treaty. The Charter of Fundamental Rights will be integrated into the Treaty. We have reached consensus on simplifying legislative procedures. Our work on Justice and Home Affairs should improve our efficiency in an area of great daily concern to European citizens, and national parliaments will have a greater role in safeguarding subsidiarity. The boldness and ambition shown by the Convention at the outset of its work must be sustained. The Europe of tomorrow will not be found by falling back on the existing provisions of the Treaties. An extra effort in the spirit of compromise is required.

At the end of the day, public opinion will pass judgement on the outcome. Our citizens are scarcely bothered with institutional theory. The mechanisms for decision-making, the nomination procedures, the institutions and their interplay fail to excite. Citizens will judge the final report of this Convention on the basis of very simple questions. Will it work? Will it improve our capacity to deliver? Will it promote prosperity? Will it enhance security? Will it increase our influence in the world? Is it efficient? Is it comprehensible? And, above all, as a Parliamentarian, I am sure citizens will ask: Does it place democracy, legitimacy and transparency at the heart of the European construct?

So the Convention has to cover institutions, but institutions are only part of the picture. Nonetheless, this is the stage we are at now, and you, Mr President, have asked us a certain number of key questions. May I make one general point. Our starting position is our strong support for the Community method, without which the Union would not have achieved the success so far of the integration project.

I do not have a simple and complete Parliament answer to the questions you raise, for a very good reason. Parliament has played the game. We have not drawn up a blueprint for the Constitution; that is the job of the Convention itself. Our Members are playing a full role. We do not seek to impose an outcome, and we know that compromises are essential to the Convention's success. But I can give you some of the thinking of my colleagues on the key points you raise.

On continuity in the Presidency of the European Council and in other Councils, let me be clear. If what is sought is to make Council more efficient, so that its deliberations are better prepared and its decisions vigorously followed up, who could oppose it? If, however, the proposal is to set up a powerful President of the Union - your unspoken question, Mr President - who would not simply chair the European Council but who would lead the Union at home and represent the Union abroad, then a number of questions have to be posed. How would this President interact with the President of the Commission? Who would elect, and who could dismiss? What would be the relationship between the Union President and a Minister for Foreign Affairs? Who would provide the checks and balances to this high office? To whom, and through whom would such an office-holder be democratically accountable, in a public, transparent and open way. Democracy matters. Any new Offices that are created must be built on democratic foundations.

Like all our institutions, Council has to reform itself. A greater degree of continuity in chairing Council may well be justified. Creating a new super-Presidency of the Union risks to raise expectations which could not be met, to raise fears which could not be allayed, to raise concerns about the appropriate institutional balance.

The second of your questions, Mr President, concerns the size and composition of the European Commission. Many in Parliament are concerned that all the Member States should be represented in all the institutions. If we wish the Commission to be strong, if we want to bolster its legitimate authority to take the difficult decisions in implementing EU policies, public opinion in the Member States requires that members from all States sit round the table. But a Commission with many more members would require further internal reform and reorganisation.

On the nomination and powers of the Commission President, we welcome the idea that Parliament - and not a hybrid body - should elect the President, as well as approving the Commission as a whole. Ours is a Parliament of minorities, where no one group or party can provide an absolute majority. That is why I believe that a vote requiring a majority of all Members of Parliament would provide safeguards for the impartiality and independence of the Commission President. Council assent would add legitimacy to such a nomination. But the key is to safeguard the authority, impartiality and independence of the President of the Commission, particularly in the nomination of his/her colleagues, and the right to assign and reshuffle portfolios, and the right to force a Commissioner's resignation when warranted. These powers of the President, not the method of his or her appointment, are surely the key to true impartiality and independence.

Mr Simitis has asked us about the nomination and powers of a Minister for Foreign Affairs. Parliament supports the idea that the functions of the High Representative and the Commissioner for External Relations should be merged. We want fusion without confusion. This can be achieved if the future Minister for Foreign Affairs is a Member of the Commission, proposed by Council, with the agreement of the Commission President, and like all other Commissioners, because of the exercise of executive and budgetary responsibilities, subject to a European Parliament vote on the College as a whole.

I would go further. A Minister for Foreign Affairs would be successful if she/he has sufficient resources - diplomatic, technical and financial - at his/her disposal. But precisely because foreign policy is essentially intergovernmental, we could end up with a Minister, an apparatus and procedures without substance, unless there is a clear political will in the Member States to make this work. If not, we would have a Foreign Minister without a foreign policy; a high office, strong in aspiration, weak in capacity to act.

This is not something which can wait until the ratification of a Constitutional Treaty. It is now urgent to move on from our disagreements over the Iraq conflict. The heavy commitment of one of our Member States in the military actions must now be transformed into a determined commitment of all the Member States to reconstruction, rebuilding and governance through the agency of the United Nations, at the earliest opportunity.

The Road Map for Peace in the Middle East must be published, the West Balkan strategy defined, the new neighbourhood policy, developed. Again, we cannot await a Constitutional Treaty before taking forward this agenda. Europe must prepare itself to speak with a common voice in the counsels of the world. The Constitution can simply give us a means. Only the concerted effort of leadership, at the level of the European Council, can deliver real meaning.

On the idea of a Congress of European and national parliamentarians, again we must ask the very pragmatic question of "what for"? The Convention is putting forward useful ideas to enhance subsidiarity controls by national parliaments. When we talk of a parliamentary dimension as necessary for the success of this Constitution, we have never meant that to be exclusively a European Parliamentary dimension. European democracy will be enhanced if regarded as an unbroken chain of accountability; but to each level, its own function: national parliaments, with their enhanced role as envisaged by the Convention, and holding governments to account; the European Parliament scrutinising the Commission, co-legislating with Council and deciding the Budget.

Let me point out to you, as you may not be aware, the extent to which national parliaments and the European Parliament work together in Foreign Affairs, and on economic and monetary questions, and on constitutional issues, already there have been 40 meetings in the past year at committee level.

As to the European Parliament and the national parliaments sitting together, there is clearly one spectacular example of how this can add value to our work - the Convention itself. We believe that the Convention model - national parliamentarians, European parliamentarians, governments and Commission - should be the model for future constitutional change, on the basis of our progress after Laeken.

I have tried to answer the questions you asked, Mr President. Let me now answer some questions you have not asked.

Firstly, the new Treaty must state that the Council legislates in full openness and transparency during all the stages of the legislative process.

At Nice, a voting mechanism was decided for Council, post-enlargement, which, quite frankly, very few understand, and with which none are satisfied. Personally, I was obliged to master these byzantine complexities during Ireland's two Nice referendums. We have to make our procedures understandable to public opinion. The European Parliament has taken the view that the legitimacy of Council decision-making would be assured if votes are taken on a simple majority of the Member States, representing a majority of the population of the Union. This double majority is one measure, along with the representation of all Member States in all the institutions, and greater continuity in Council which could provide a reconciliation between two seemingly irreconcilable views, namely, on the one hand, the fear of some of the smaller Member States of being suffocated by the interests of the bigger Member States, and on the other hand, the fear of the larger Member States of being outvoted by a coalition of the smaller Member States.

Fissures between different States and interests only arise where there is a fear, well-founded or not, of being ignored. This is the time, and this is the place, to listen and to speak with mutual understanding and respect. Let us try to build on the strength of one Europe and not on the weaknesses of many Europes.

On one other point of substance, we had some difficulties before and up to our vote last week on the budgetary consequences of enlargement. We found a solution, thanks to the efforts of the Greek Presidency, the Commission and Parliament's Budgets Committee. Similarly, in the Convention we must find a solution, which respects the budgetary prerogatives of both Council and Parliament, on the annual budget and on our multiannual budget perspectives.

Mr President, in the European Parliament's view, the timetable you laid down in Copenhagen, with the end date for the Convention's work in June, must be adhered to. There is no gain by delay. We know the points of contention. There is a momentum in the Convention's work which risks dilution if a later deadline was set now. After the period of disarray in the Union over Iraq, dragging out the Convention process would be the wrong signal. It would tell our citizens that we are hesitating about the future course of the Union. The Convention will be followed by the IGC. We need that IGC completed in good time before the European elections, so that the voters know what perspective there is for the Union, and the Parliament they will be electing.

When the Convention was launched, the Financial Times wrote that President Giscard d'Estaing had the difficult task of " ... *piloting an untested vessel with an untried crew in uncharted waters to a destination that is far from obvious.* "

Now that I hear that President Giscard d'Estaing may be thinking of taking his Praesidium members quite literally out to sea next month, to produce the final draft articles of the future Constitution for Europe, *je voudrais vous souhaiter, Monsieur le Président, "Bon voyage, et bon courage!"*