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SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT, MR JOSEP BORRELL FONTELLES
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SPEECH
BY THE PRESIDENT, MR JOSEP BORRELL FONTELLES
TO THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL

4 November 2004
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be able to address you for the first time as President of the European Parliament.

Last week's events in Strasbourg no doubt disturbed and perhaps even displeased some of you. As you are aware, the European Parliament did not go as far as to vote on the matter, but I should like to give you my interpretation of the facts, on the subject of which I was able to speak to some of you briefly in Rome.

Firstly, I should like to express my firm belief that what has happened will strengthen democracy within the EU, enhance our institutions, generate public interest in the European political debate and enable people's basic rights to be upheld more effectively.

Secondly, I did not at any time think that the events constituted an institutional crisis or a show of strength between the institutions. What happened is part of normal democratic debate. It was a proper political debate which aroused much interest amongst the general public. We rightly lament the poor turnout at European elections. We fear that the coming referendums on the draft Constitutional Treaty will not sufficiently engage the attention of our fellow citizens. We can only draw satisfaction from the fact that the European Parliament, which now has more powers, exercises those powers in a responsible fashion.

Let us recall that under the existing Treaties (and even more so under the future Constitution), the European Parliament has (and will have) the power to invest the Commission as a college. In my view the balance between the institutions has not been destroyed; nor has it even been adjusted. The hearings of the Commissioners-designate which were organised by Parliament's various committees enabled us to assess the abilities of the individuals concerned and the policies which they intended to pursue.

Thirdly, the debate was concerned - if not exclusively, then at least to a great extent - with highly sensitive social issues: the crucial question of asylum and immigration policy, the role of women at work and within the family, non-discrimination on the grounds of sexual preference and the relationship between ethics and politics. The European Parliament has never discriminated against anybody on the basis of his or her beliefs.

In a Europe which has recently adopted a Charter of Fundamental Rights, it is normal that such subjects should be discussed.

Irrespective of the opinions held on the matter, the debate has demonstrated that our Union is more than just economic in nature; it is based on common fundamental values. I sincerely believe that Parliament has helped to strengthen the values upon which Europe is based.

However, Parliament also drew attention to other concerns. It wants an independent Commission made up of Commissioners who are competent in the areas assigned to them.

Lastly, I firmly believe that the European Union needs both a credible European Parliament and a strong Commission. Neither of those two institutions will gain in strength by weakening the other. Mr Barroso (the Commission President in whom Parliament expressed broad confidence last July) has taken the wise and just decision not to submit a proposal in respect of his College of Commissioners.

Parliament has merely exercised the powers which are conferred on it under the Treaties. An institution founded on universal suffrage cannot be assigned powers on condition that it does not exercise them.

I hope that, very soon, a political arrangement will be proposed which will enable Parliament to express its confidence in the College of Commissioners. Very important steps have already been taken in that direction and I firmly believe that further ones will be taken in the course of this European Council meeting, thereby enabling Mr Barroso to put forward his proposal with a view to attaining such an objective. The European Parliament is ready to initiate without delay the process which will enable the vote on the investiture of the new Commission to be held, if possible, at its next part-session.

Furthermore, I should like to salute the special efforts made by the Dutch Presidency on the subject of **communication with the general public**. I myself attended the very interesting informal Council meeting of European Affairs Ministers which was held on that topic in Amsterdam on 5 October. In December, Parliament will adopt its opinion on the Constitutional Treaty and on that basis we shall undertake information activities which will be as decentralised as possible.

The work of the Convention began with a 'listening stage' which enabled us to discover what aspirations ordinary people have with regard to the European Union. They were essentially three in number: employment, security, and Europe's presence on the international stage.

And, indeed, jobs and security are the two main topics on your agenda.

As regards growth and employment, the report drawn up by Mr Wim Kok on the **Lisbon Strategy** is now available.

The first thing which we need to do with regard to the Lisbon Strategy is to stop calling it that. Nobody knows what we are talking about. I propose to refer to the 'strategy for competitiveness, social cohesion and the environment'.

By the next Spring European Council, five years will have gone by since the European Union decided to set itself the objective (and I quote) of 'becoming the world's most competitive and most dynamic knowledge-based economy, capable of sustainable economic growth accompanied by a quantitative and qualitative improvement in employment and greater social cohesion'. That oft-repeated sentence is beginning to sound like a mantra.

Be that as it may, the process must nonetheless continue if we are to secure high employment, which (as the Kok report makes so abundantly clear) is the only thing capable of financing - in an ageing Europe - the policy of interdependence which is the centrepiece of the European social model.

At Lisbon we set ourselves the target of 70% of the active population in employment. The percentage is currently 63%, as compared with 71% in the USA.

As regards expenditure on research and development, a target of 3% of GNP was set at the Barcelona European Council. Europe is currently stagnating at 1.9% of GNP, as against 2.8% in the USA and 3.1% in Japan.

However, we must bear in mind that such objectives were set during a period of economic prosperity. In these economically straitened times it must be conceded that achievement of those objectives is still a distant goal which will not be reached in 2010 either, unless considerably greater efforts are made.

And when objectives are plainly unattainable, we must have sufficient courage to revise them without giving up hope of achieving them within a realistic timeframe.

Certainly, making the European economy competitive is a battle which must be fought primarily within each individual Member State - as the Commission and the Council are well aware. However, the EU itself can and must contribute to the process - otherwise what is the point of talking about it here?

We must ensure that directives are promptly transposed into the Member States' internal law. As you are aware, only seven of the 40 Lisbon Strategy directives have been implemented in all the Member States, whilst the average transposition rate for all EU directives is at most 60%.

If a 'strategy for competitiveness, social cohesion and the environment' is to succeed, our three institutions must schedule their work on the basis of a strict timetable and better targeted objectives, whilst the agreement on better law-making which they signed in December 2003 must be implemented to the letter.

Next, the goal of the discussions that we are to hold on the reform of the Stability Pact and on the future financing of the Union must also be to encourage European growth, high quality employment, research, technologies and innovation.

To this end, the European Parliament has adopted a mechanism for coordination between all the parliamentary committees involved, and set up a temporary committee on the future financing of the Union, which I will chair.

On this point, and as the Prime Ministers of Poland and Denmark so rightly said this morning, we must increase the funding allocated to research in order to mobilise the scientific resources of the 25 Member States and provide incentives to young scientists so that their expertise is not put to use outside the EU, thereby exacerbating our technological deficit.

The citizens of Europe also expect the EU to guarantee their security. The European Parliament would like to see, on the basis of the existing Treaties, the early adoption of certain provisions laid down in the Constitutional Treaty: a common European asylum system and a uniform status for refugees, on which discussions are in progress.

Similarly, we feel that activation of the two bridges for measures in the field of immigration (Article 67 of the Treaty) and for the fight against terrorism and international crime cannot wait until entry into force of the Constitution.

It is of the utmost importance to the European Parliament that decisions in this area be taken in codecision between the two branches of the legislative authority. I strongly encourage you, in this respect, to take up the proposal by the Netherlands Presidency which, in the interests of democratic logic, has called on the European Council to move to qualified majority voting in the fields of asylum, immigration and border control.

This is one of the key points of the Constitutional Treaty: if the Council were to oppose it today, how could we then explain to the people of Europe that ratification of this Constitution is of crucial importance?

The primary problem that impacts on the coexistence and security of the citizens of Europe is that of the threat of international terrorism. The European Parliament views as urgent the adoption of a set of measures: enhancing of the collaboration and exchange of information between police services, not least through the conversion of Europol into a European Agency, negotiation on behalf of the Union of genuine international police cooperation agreements and the creation of a European office for assistance to the victims of terrorism.

Finally, the European Parliament attaches great importance to the introduction of a genuine European asylum policy to strengthen measures for the protection of refugees which guarantee they can fully exercise their rights and which prohibit any collective expulsion.

Ladies and gentlemen, the European Parliament can also contribute to preparing the ground for the difficult decision you are to take in December with regard to **Turkey**. It can act as a helpful partner, bearing in mind that Parliament's assent is required at the end of the process. The release of Leyla Zana in April this year was due in part to our refusal to allow a winner of Parliament's Sakharov Prize to be forgotten.

The content of the European Parliament's opinion on Turkey, to be adopted on 2 December, is difficult to predict. But it is better to have an open and frank debate, focussing on the real issues, than a debate based on half-truths and prejudices. I will in any case visit Turkey the day after the vote in the European Parliament to explain Parliament's position to the Turkish authorities and to Turkish public opinion.

Despite the importance of the other matters on your agenda today, I cannot avoid addressing the issue of the Statute for Members of the European Parliament.

In January 2004, the Council did not reach the qualified majority needed for approval of the compromise text negotiated by successive presidencies.

Therefore, immediately after my election to the Presidency of the European Parliament, I established contacts with several Members of the Council, and with yourself, Mr President-in-Office.

The European Parliament remains deeply convinced of the need for a single statute for its Members, with the enlargement to twenty-five Member States having made this essential

The European Parliament is again prepared to show flexibility in order for an agreement to be reached. However, you will understand that Parliament cannot formally present a new proposal without being sure that it will be accepted by the Council. I therefore feel that an informal meeting on this matter is needed before the end of this presidency or at the start of the next. Any later would be too late.

The European Council must let us know whether or not it agrees with the need for a single statute for Members of the European Parliament, as envisaged by the Treaty. Please allow me to reiterate that this matter is one of extreme urgency. If the answer is 'yes' I am sure that we can reach an agreement. If the answer is 'no' then the European Parliament has to know.

In conclusion, the European Parliament intends to animate the European political debate on all the choices crucial to our future. It is a debate from which we will emerge stronger and, I hope, better understood by public opinion. The success of our Constitution, a stage vital to our future, depends on it.

Let us work together to this end.
