

'Active Citizenship'

Conference by the Jesuit European Social Centre (JESC)

SPEECH

by

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of the
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Ladies and gentlemen:

- It is with great pleasure that I would like to welcome you to this seminar by the Jesuit European Social Centre, which is dedicated to Active Citizenship;
 - My first contacts with the Jesuit European Social Centre on this event, were as far back as 15 months ago and even during those early discussions I was very much intrigued by the idea of an event linking education to active citizenship;
 - For of course in previous centuries, universities were closely inter-connected, directly shaping European societies, politically and socio-economically;
 - Universities were clearly sources of energy, passion and investment and sought to raise the intellectual tone of society and to deepen human understanding;
 - Today, it is true that 'education' continues as a powerful vehicle of employment, innovation and research; we still need education to avoid poverty and social exclusion; and we need education to continue our humanistic values and democratic system;
 - However, I do believe that in our current European society, the links between education, universities and active citizenship have been considerably weakened;
 - Indeed, it would also appear that universities have largely folded back onto the national level, something which cannot be explained only by the fact that 'education' is not an EU responsibility;
 - Nonetheless I do consider that a *positive* dimension to the socio-economic and political crisis that Europe is currently undergoing, is the fact that there is now the *opportunity* for universities to re-define their role, to engage more in partnerships and to position themselves as *key actors* within the European public arena.
 - And for this reason, I very much support this initiative of the Jesuit European Social Centre.
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- Perhaps I can add that this is a topic that the Various Interests Group of the European Economic and Social Committee has already touched upon, even though much more needs to be done;
 - Indeed, Professor Frank Delmartino was a speaker at the seminar that we organised in 2011 on the subject of universities;
 - During that event, we examined two inter-related topics: 'The economic crisis as a challenge for universities' and 'The role of universities as actors in the European public arena';
 - So I am very pleased that the conference here today will enable us to build on the Group's previous work;
 - I would also like to inform you that the EESC has recently started work on an Own-Initiative Opinion on the subject of 'Inter-cultural dialogue', which could be a useful contribution to the work of the Jesuit European Social Centre.
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- In reading through the position paper which accompanies this event, I realised that the subject under discussion is indeed much wider and much deeper than I had originally appreciated;

- For in the discussion paper, we are called upon to examine the nature of European citizenship, the role of education, the responsibilities between citizens, between the EU and Member States, and between current and future generations in terms of sustainable development;
 - We are called upon to examine the concept of the common goods of humanity, which also implies rights and responsibilities;
 - And we come across some very interesting proposals such as the establishment of a 'Universal Charter of Human Responsibilities' and proposals for introducing incentives to 'learn active and responsible citizenship' through formal, non-formal and informal learning.
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- Before ending my introductory remarks, I would like to inform you that at the end of last year, the EESC adopted an Opinion on the implementation of Article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty, which is of course the Article dealing with participatory democracy;
 - This Article is crucial as no national constitution foresees such formalised participation by civil society and citizens;
 - And together with Articles 10 and 12 (on the involvement of the European Parliament and of national parliaments respectively), the EU has created a triangle of rights and obligations between all of these actors;
 - And although the willingness to involve civil society in the European project is not new, clearly these three Articles in the Lisbon Treaty send a *political message of confidence* in active citizenship, in dialogue and in representative democracy;
 - Article 11 in itself, is a clear opportunity to make existing consultations more regular, more structured and above all, more effective with the European institutions;
 - For this reason, in my Opinion we concentrated very much on practical ways to implement parts 1 and 2 of the Article 11, and we arrived at eight recommendations, of which five concern the EESC itself!
 - I will not go into details, but I will mention one of these recommendations, which responds to the necessity to find a forum which will help to overcome some of the concerns of alienation of our citizens;
 - My proposal is to organise the Etats généraux of parliaments, where national parliaments from our Member States together with the European Parliament could come up with 5 key recommendations for Europe;
 - In parallel the European Economic and Social Committee could organise a similar event for civil society and working together we could forge the bridge between our citizens, the electorate and the elected;
 - So we could jointly work towards a structured debate on our future, restoring both representative and participatory democracy, stimulating governments and European institutions to move Europe forward, which includes preparing the 2014 elections to the European Parliament.
 - Ladies and gentlemen, this European Year of Citizens is an immense opportunity for civil society, citizens and the Institutions;

- Unfortunately, the European Commission gave a very narrow remit to the topics to be addressed this year, and we have been critical of their unwillingness to also explore the fundamental issues of civil dialogue;
- But it is also up to us to create opportunities and to seek to overcome challenges and this seminar today is a step in the right direction;
- So I would like to end my presentation, with two quotes of Jean Monnet from many years ago;
- Firstly, that "*People only accept change when they are faced with necessity, and only recognise necessity when a crisis is upon them*";
- Secondly, that: "*Nothing can be done without citizens but nothing can last without institutions*";
- So let us use Europe's crisis to strive for both *growth* and *equity* and to move Europe forward;
- Let us commit to a Europe for and with our citizens;
- Thank you for your attention.