



European Economic and Social Committee

Welcome to the home of European civil society

Conference:
**How to reconcile the future EU chemical legislation
and industry competitiveness**

at

the EESC building

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Speech given by

Mr Roger Briesch

President of the

European Economic and Social Committee

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the home of organised civil society, the headquarters of the European Economic and Social Committee. The Committee is a consultative body that embarked on a new term of office at its plenary session at the end of October. This session also elected me as EESC president – a key task at a time when we are facing tremendous new challenges. One of the most important of these is enlargement, for which the Brussels European Council in late October represented a new milestone. Another is the Convention's work to consolidate Europe's political and institutional machinery.

I am carrying on the work started by my predecessors, who sought to consolidate the Committee's role as an institutional forum for consultation, representation, information and expression which enables the representatives of civil society organisations to play an integral part in the process of shaping policies and decisions at Community level.

As I stressed at my election, the European Economic and Social Committee is, thanks to its broad and varied membership and its work, an essential element in the European model of society.

It fosters dialogue among all the stakeholders in society by taking account of grassroots concerns and aspirations, which are articulated and publicised through its opinions and, in a more practical way, through the work it does on the ground at all levels and in all countries.

Our Committee draws its legitimacy from the fact that all its members, who are selected on the basis of their responsibilities and experience, come from representative economic, social and civic organisations or groupings in the Member States to play a constructive role in the opinion-forming process at European level in general.

The added value of the Committee resides in the fact that this process involves all the players in civil society, including organisations other than the social partners.

That is why the Committee is the obvious choice as the forum for "civil dialogue" and is in a position to offer the most appropriate framework for furthering the joint implementation of the sustainable development strategy by integrating the social, economic, environmental and financial dimensions.

As part of our preparatory work for the EESC's contribution to the European Convention, we stressed that sustainable development is essentially a matter of solidarity - between generations, peoples and nations.

The European Union has long since incorporated the principle of sustainable development into the Treaties, and produced a long-term strategy for coordinating policies. The aim is sustainable development in the economic, social and environmental sense.

This ties in with the pledge made and pursued at global level since the Rio de Janeiro conference and consolidated by a series of international agreements relating to the environment and the preservation of the planet's natural resources.

In August, we were actively involved in the Johannesburg conference, seeking to play our part in helping breathe new life into global commitments, and on 12 and 13 September, we co-hosted – with the Commission – a stakeholder forum on sustainable development in the European Union. Its purpose was to bring together all the stakeholders involved in amalgamating the three facets of the strategy set out at the Gothenburg summit in June 2001.

I mention this process because the topic you will be discussing today – industry competitiveness and the future of chemical legislation – is an integral part of the sustainable development debate. This point was already brought out very clearly in the preparatory document for the Gothenburg summit under the "public health" heading.

For its part, the White Paper on a strategy for a future chemicals policy has also set a high level of protection for human health and the environment as an objective – along with the efficient functioning of the internal market and the promotion of innovation and competitiveness in the European chemicals industry.

We adopted our opinion on the White Paper in October 2001 following a wide-ranging debate and very close cooperation with the European Parliament.

Our rapporteur was **Sergio Colombo**, an Italian trade unionist who has been able to put his many years of experience in the chemicals sector to good use as EESC rapporteur on issues relating to environmental protection and industrial policy. **Mr Colombo** took part in a number of stakeholder meetings arranged at the Parliament by the rapporteur, **Ms Schörling** and by **Ms Müller**, and also attended the conference on the impact of the new policy on industry that was hosted by the Commission on 21 May 2002.

Today, we therefore have the opportunity to continue the debate, pending finalisation of the legislative proposals on which the Commission is currently working.

As we said in our opinion, the Committee is "aware of the practical problems that remain unsolved with regard to translating the broadly acceptable general policies of the White Paper into specific laws".

Nevertheless, the Committee again stresses "the need for all the stakeholders to take a positive stance vis-à-vis the complexities of the implementation phase. It intends to monitor the process and make its own contribution towards a future chemicals industry that maintains and strengthens competitiveness in a context of safety and maximum protection for public health and the environment".

I am convinced that workers' organisations can have major input into this venture.

Indeed, our opinion deplored the White Paper's inadequate mention of workers "given that the experience gained in bargaining between the social partners has secured major improvements in working conditions and health and safety in the workplace, as well as considerable progress in the relationship between factories and local areas, through the involvement of public authorities".

As the Committee went on to say, "This experience ought to serve as a major point of reference in the future process, not least because workers are the first to face the risk arising from finished products and also intermediate compound products whose safety credentials are often unknown."

In this respect, we note that "it would be useful to launch a process of worker education and training, drawing on the wealth of experience that has been built up on production sites".

Admittedly, however, future chemical production is not contingent on social dialogue alone, but must involve all the players concerned. Since the public has come to associate chemical production with health risks and environmental pollution, due consideration must be given to the new demands of society as a whole.

It is clear therefore that with the active participation of the interested parties and an informed public behind it, this far-reaching, ambitious project could give the European chemicals industry an unprecedented opportunity to gain acceptance for its products which, in a modern society, are essential for the development of increasingly advanced new processes and technologies, and to dispel the widespread hostility that is worryingly apparent when, for instance, the decentralised authorities come to consider licences for new installations.

Our opinion suggests a range of practical and accompanying measures to reward innovative companies and encourage the many small businesses that produce, import or use chemicals to cut their use of substances that raise specific health or environmental concerns, and to develop substitutes.

We also highlight the importance of the global dimension. One of the keys to defending the competitive position of the European chemicals industry is making every effort to ensure that EU laws become the international norm.

Far from being a marginal aspect of the strategy, this objective is the key to the application of the precautionary principle at world level. Hence the importance of the progress made under international conventions – such as those on persistent organic pollutants and the import and export of dangerous chemicals.

This afternoon, at the round table, **Mr Staffan Nilsson**, a member of the EESC Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, will have the opportunity to refer to a number of more specific aspects.

I should have liked to take part in your discussions, which promise to be very interesting, but unfortunately I have to leave to attend a meeting of the new Committee Bureau. I believe this conference represents a new step forward in cooperation between ourselves and the European Parliament. I hope very much to build on this cooperation in the future, and wish the conference every success.
