

**Speech by Roger Briesch
on his election as president of the
European Economic and Social Committee**

Brussels, 24 October 2002

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank you for the confidence you have placed in me.

I will do my best to live up to your expectations over the next two years.

I know that the task before me is not an easy one. The European Economic and Social Committee, like the world in which it is expected to fulfil its brief, is in a process of upheaval. The European Union is being transformed, widening its geographical area and deepening the political and institutional set-up within which our Committee carries out its duties. The expectations of the men and women we aim to serve is changing with the gradual growth of our transnational community, which is still a Union of States, of course, but which is moving ever closer to becoming a Union of Citizens.

You will appreciate that I am not able today to present you with a detailed work programme for the next two years. I shall submit the work programme for my term of office at the next plenary session in December, on the basis of a memo, after consulting the new Presidency (which is already being done) and conferring with the Secretary-General and his colleagues on the tasks they are responsible for.

I can already assure you that I shall make every effort to continue the work begun by my predecessors, **Tom Jenkins**, **Beatrice Rangoni-Machiavelli** and **Göke Frerichs**.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Over the next two years, the key features of the EU's internal policy will be:

- the work of the Convention and its results, as well as the subsequent IGC, in the second half of 2003, which will be called upon to make a decision on the draft constitution submitted by the Convention and to draw up a new treaty;
- the preparations, in 2003, and the completion, in 2004, of the accession of new Member States, to whom we must extend an open, warm and generous welcome: borders are the scars of history.

.../...

The EU has brought the peace and progress which now guarantees us a life of dignity, employment, security and solidarity;

- the European Parliament elections in June 2004 and the formation of a new Commission in autumn 2004.

In addition to these events, which will occur under the successive presidencies of Denmark (until the end of this year), Greece and Italy in 2003, and Ireland and the Netherlands in 2004, other features include:

- the ongoing debate on the content and methods of economic and social policy and on the development of the European social model in the context of globalisation;
- the search for an appropriate strategy to ensure sustainable development by integrating the social, economic, environmental and financial dimensions;
- the persistence of budgetary constraints and the debate on funding Community policies;
- efforts to find a new consensus on the role of Europe in the world, its contribution to the development of its neighbours around the Mediterranean, the countries of Africa and Asia, and its relations with the countries of Latin America and the USA.

Today, half of the world's population survives on less than €2 a day. Eleven million children under the age of five die every year from avoidable illnesses. More than a billion people have no access to drinking water and the gap continues to grow. The fight against terrorism also involves reducing inequalities and developing democracy and civil liberties.

We must be mindful of future developments and changes. In ten years, 60% of the world's population will live in Asia. The countries driving growth will be China, India, Brazil and the USA, with all that that entails in terms of redirected investment if Europe fails to find and establish its position in this context.

THE EUROPEAN MODEL OF SOCIETY AND THE ROLE OF THE COMMITTEE

During the same period of time, decisions will be taken which will determine the future shape of the European Union, as well as the position of each of its institutions within its political set-up.

It is vital that, when this happens, the Committee's role is clearly reaffirmed and recognized as an institutional forum for consultation, representation, information and expression

.../...

enabling the representatives of civil society organisations (economic, social and civic) to play an integral part in the process of shaping policy and decisions at the Community level.

I am aware that my presidency will be judged first and foremost on the results achieved in this area.

With this in mind, it is imperative that the European Economic and Social Committee itself articulates and vigorously defends its interests regarding its status, function and role, that is to say, the institutional position of our Committee in relation to the legislative and executive institutions of the Union, as well as its mandate and remit, its rights and instruments.

In so doing, we must continue to observe the tenets of previous presidencies, while at the same time showing a readiness for innovation.

The European Union I would like to see serving the citizens is built on ideals and values: peace, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, solidarity and subsidiarity, justice and cohesion, the social market economy, the respective roles of the State and of social and economic players.

Economic and social cohesion is an essential factor in forming a European identity, especially considering the substantial effort required to integrate the candidate countries. It implies an adequate redistribution of resources which would not result from endless bargaining between states.

These various elements combine to form what is rightly called the European social model. It is enshrined in the Treaties establishing the European Union in the form of general objectives, particularly the achievement of a high level of employment and sustainable development by promoting social dialogue, which is first and foremost the task of the social partners.

The history of our countries shows that the establishment of social models is only partly attributable to public authorities and legislation; the contribution of the social partners and relations between and with civil society organisations have played a crucial role. Their creativity, their capacity for compromise and their ability to influence society should be given an appropriate voice at the European level.

Thanks to its broad and varied membership and its work, the European Economic and Social Committee is an essential element in the European model of society. It fosters dialogue between all the stakeholders in society by taking account of the concerns and aspirations of the citizens who are closest to the grass roots, articulating and publicizing them 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 its members, who are selected on the basis of their particular responsibilities and experience, come from representative organisations or groupings in the Member States to play a constructive role in the process of shaping European-level opinion in general. The added value of the Committee resides in the fact that this process involves all the players in civil society, including other organisations in addition to the social partners.

That is why the Committee is the obvious choice as a forum for "civil dialogue", that is the representative of organised civil society, which also comprises organisations representing a wide range of other social, economic, cultural and civic interests, in addition to associations of employers and trade unions.

New prospects for partnership must be explored and new synergies created so as to improve the balance of power in relation to the European authorities enabling us to be more effective in our dealings with them. The Committee's capacity to influence governments and international organisations must also be boosted.

It would seem to me to be essential to better exploit our role as the bridge between Europe and the civil society organisations which we – you, ladies and gentlemen – represent. I will have the opportunity to submit proposals in this regard at our next session in December.

In short, we should capitalise on our assets!

THE EUROPEAN CONVENTION

This is the profile of the European Economic and Social Committee which we should be defending in the European Convention, where we are represented by three observers and three alternates.

The decisions and work of the Convention have so far remained the preserve of a small number of initiates, but it is reasonable to expect that the current debate on the future of the EU will help to open a vast workshop disseminating knowledge about the European Union.

In addition to the work in progress on the powers of the EU, a more appropriate application of subsidiarity, better economic and social governance, legal personality etc., we must also specify and reaffirm the kind of Europe we wish to see.

I advocate a constitutional treaty, or even a constitution, which will represent a quantum leap in the democratic legitimacy of the EU, and a federal set-up for its institutional apparatus.

I am also in favour of a cohesive union able to make decisions and take clear positions, which means extending qualified majority voting.

I would like to see economic and social governance going hand in hand with a simplification of the instruments of economic governance.

At the same time, the EU must play a more prominent role in the world to foster peace, freedom, democracy and respect for human rights by promoting the emergence of a new economic order aimed at wiping out poverty and destitution.

On this point, we regard it as essential that the Charter of Fundamental Rights be incorporated into the new constitution. This is all the more necessary because these rights are an integral part of the European identity.

The Convention must come up with a kind of institutional architecture – with strong democratic legitimacy and clearly defined powers and responsibilities – which is best able to ensure that these rights are respected, by developing a competitive economy, building a harmonious society with less inequality and encouraging the active involvement of citizens in working for the common good.

A DEMOCRATIC AND FEDERAL UNION

While all subscribing to the basic values currently upheld by the Charter and in future to be enshrined in the EU Constitution, the countries of Europe have different traditions, cultures and histories. This diversity is an asset for Europe. The Union must preserve it and ensure that the new institutional architecture allows for the maintenance not only of traditions and specific characteristics, but also of diverse cultural systems.

The Community method, characterised by a balance between cultural diversity and political unity allowing the European social model to develop, must remain the basis of the Union's future institutional architecture.

Indeed, experience has taught us that every time the Community method is applied, satisfactory results are achieved, while we are frequently disappointed by the mediocre and ineffective results obtained with the intergovernmental method.

The fact is that the interest of the Union is neither the sum of the interests of the Member States, nor their lowest common denominator. It cannot therefore be decided in negotiations where every participant has a right of veto.

I am convinced that, ultimately, only a democratic and federal structure will enable us to tackle urgent political and practical problems with any prospect of success, while at the same time giving substance to EU citizenship. Only a democratic and federal architecture, which respects the principles of dialogue, participation and solidarity, can reflect the intrinsic nature of the European Union, namely a continuous striving to achieve unity in diversity.

In this spirit, I would ask you to follow me when it comes to strengthening the EESC's presence in the debate on the future of Europe on all the important questions, and especially:

- the defence and further development of the European social model, or of the European model of society;
- the involvement of civil society and its organisations in the process of shaping public opinion, in legislation, in its implementation and in a range of decisions, i.e. the rules of governance and of civil and social dialogue.

At its last plenary session before renewal, held in September, the Committee adopted a resolution setting out our thinking on these matters. Now we must agree on a more precise description of the position and functions of the EESC in the EU's new institutional architecture, drawing up concrete proposals and taking effective steps to get them adopted.

OTHER PRIORITIES

At the same time we should

- optimise our role as a consultative body to the large institutions (Parliament, Council of Ministers and Commission), thereby reinforcing the EESC's proper status in their eyes;
- concentrate our activities in the areas where the added value of our contribution is most substantial, without disregarding other, future tasks. We must therefore set ourselves clear priorities which we wish to keep to;
- improve the representativeness and credibility of the EESC as the institutional representative of civil society, including organisations not represented within the Committee, by implementing the decisions already taken and by continuing work to broaden our church;
- develop an active and systematic communication and information policy to enhance the profile and impact of our work;

- devote particular attention to welcoming future members (and officials) from the new EU Member States. Work on this is already underway;
- continue to strengthen the resources and internal structures of the Committee and the Members' Statute.

But, ladies and gentlemen, as I said earlier, in December I shall present you with a work programme covering all the areas in which I would like to see our Committee making progress with a view to increasing its capacity to discharge its tasks and responsibilities ever more effectively.

It goes without saying that this will only be possible if the Presidency to whom you have entrusted the task of encouragement and leadership works dynamically as a team, with commitment and transparency.

I hope to work in collaboration with the two vice-presidents.

I will, of course, devote particular attention to cooperation and ongoing dialogue with the presidents of the three groups who represent the three pillars of the European Economic and Social Committee. They are responsible for preparing the work of the various forums of our Committee within their ranks and thereby contributing to the development and influence of the EESC through its work and action.

In addition to realising our aspirations to serve the general interest, we must build hope, be committed to implementing it and act to make it a reality.

To act as a bridge, a link, to express expectations and aspirations, in concrete and credible terms to be sure, but with a dose of sensitivity, heart and passion, in short providing content, meaning and soul.

Let me finish with two more quotations from Victor Hugo:

- "The greatest ennui is to exist without living"
- "I believe in what I say and I do what I must"

These will be the watchwords of my commitment to you.
