



European Economic and Social Committee

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Speech by
The EESC president, Roger Briesch

Mid-term review

Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Check Against Delivery

Dear colleagues,

A little over a year ago, in December 2002, two months after I became president of the European Economic and Social Committee, I presented a programme to you setting out the actions that I wished to see undertaken in the course of my two years in office.

I identified four key areas, namely:

1. Optimising the Committee's role as a consultative body to the EP, Council and Commission by stepping up cooperation.
2. Improving the EESC's representativeness and credibility as institutional representative of civil society.
3. Developing the Committee's resources and internal structures.
4. Reinforcing the EESC's presence in the debate on the future of Europe.

Today, half way through my term of office, I would like to take stock of progress in these four areas and highlight what remains to be done over the coming months.

But before doing that, I would like to make a general comment.

Overall, I feel that the European Economic and Social Committee has every right to be satisfied with its achievements over the past months. We have, by and large, fulfilled our role. I would like to thank all those who have contributed to this, members, through their various responsibilities within the Committee, and officials.

But some members have so far played only a limited part in this work. I regret this situation, and I should like to bring it to your attention.

I am aware of the problems we are all facing and the difficulties arising from our commitments elsewhere, which are not always easy to manage. But even taking account of this, it is still sometimes not enough. I therefore hope that this year will see stronger commitment from all members, and of course from the secretariat.

Our profile and our credibility are at stake, at institutional level, at the level of the organisations we represent here, and with regard to public opinion.

These necessary remarks do not aim to praise or criticise, but to take a clear look at the way we work in order to correct, raise awareness and mobilise the EESC on the objectives we have set ourselves and therefore to respond positively to our commitments and to our mission.

On that critical note, let us now come to what has been achieved and what remains to be done.

1. **Optimising the Committee's role as a consultative body to the EP, Council and Commission by stepping up cooperation**

Firstly, we must continue to promote necessary and appropriate selectivity in the work of the Committee, in line with the Bureau decisions of October 2001 and July 2002.

These Bureau decisions have mostly been implemented. Thus last year we made a satisfactory choice of topics for own-initiative opinions. And we have also made progress – as we had set out to do – both in the ad hoc group set up for that purpose and in the Bureau - in reaching agreement on measures for innovation and adaptation necessary for enlargement. We have reason to hope that the resulting amendments to the Rules of Procedure will be adopted in the spring.

We have made considerable progress as regards the presentation of our opinions, but we must do still more to make our opinions more attractive, concise, accessible, comprehensible and interesting with short, well-written summaries and practical suggestions for amendments to the Commission's proposals.

Moreover, I note with satisfaction the requests for exploratory opinions received from the European Parliament (2), the Italian presidency (3) and especially the Commission (9). The political impact of these exploratory opinions is considerable since they enable us to initiate change. In any case, the confidence in the Committee demonstrated by these requests for exploratory opinions requires of us a high level of intellectual commitment and strict procedural discipline.

I would like to underline the good cooperative relations developed with the Commission through these exploratory opinions. Examples of this are the conference on the contribution of civil society to the Lisbon process and the work on sustainable development.

I have sought to maintain good relations with the various leading players.

I have kept you regularly informed through my statements at the start of plenary sessions. As you know, last year I met not only the president of the Commission, **Romano Prodi**, and the vice-president in charge of relations with the Institutions, **Loyola de Palacio**, but also several other Commissioners (**Michel Barnier, Pascal Lamy, Chris Patten, Antonio Vitorino, Viviane Reding**) and held in-depth discussions with them on cooperation and joint projects.

Apart from numerous meetings, including the official enlargement ceremony in Athens during the Greek presidency, I also maintained close and fruitful contacts before and during the Italian presidency with Minister **Rocco Buttiglione**, whom I met on several occasions, and Ambassador **Umberto Vattani**. A good relationship was also established with the president of the European Parliament, **Pat Cox**.

In the first half of 2003, participation as an observer, with my colleagues **Göke Frerichs** and **Annemarie Sigmund**, in the work of the European Convention gave me (and my presidency colleagues) many opportunities to talk to and make contact with MEPs and national MPs, as well as with government representatives. We made full use of these opportunities. I would also like to mention the active participation of **Gianni Vinay**, **Jan Olsson**, **Giacomo Regaldo** and **Mario Sepi**, in their capacity as alternate EESC members of the Convention as well as the subcommittee's active support.

However, my hopes of entering into partnership and cooperation agreements with the Council and the European Parliament have so far been only partially realised.

The nature of the Council makes it difficult to progress. We can however achieve some results – as we saw during the Italian presidency – if we seek more systematic cooperation with the successive EU presidencies. Over the next few weeks and months, we will make approaches to the Irish presidency, with which we established contact at an early stage, as we have also done with the Netherlands government, which will take over the presidency in July.

As regards signing a protocol of partnership and cooperation with the European Parliament, there is little progress to report. We remain determined, however, to follow the action plan approved by the Bureau in the spring of 2002 and to make contact with the new European Parliament.

On that subject, it is in our interests to develop specific cooperation with the other institutions, bodies, agencies and foundations of the European Union. We have done this with the Dublin Foundation, with which our Consultative Commission on Industrial Change held a very interesting joint conference, and with which we have agreed to maintain ongoing cooperation.

Our attempts to institute systematic political cooperation with the Committee of the Regions have been an uphill struggle, for several reasons. Our approaches have evoked little response. I do not intend to give up, however. In February, when the new presidency of the CoR takes office, we will make another attempt, since I remain convinced that these two consultative Committees, the CoR and the EESC, can complement each other and have everything to gain politically if they jointly put their case to the EU Institutions.

As you know, dear colleagues, I have always been particularly interested in our relations and cooperation with our global partners. It is not a matter of responding to individual concerns but of taking an active role in issues of fundamental importance, both for our countries and for the EU, which will affect our future. Excluding these partners and issues from our approach, our strategy and our commitments would be both mistaken and damaging. Already, a major part of our credibility and our profile is directly linked to our opinions and our action at this level, since they reflect key issues in EU policy. This is why I have placed particular emphasis during my term of office on defining the role of the Committee and its external relations priorities in the general context of EU foreign policy.

At the operational level, in parallel with the work of our joint consultative committees with the future Member States – whose task will come to an end in May – and our various consultation forums set up in the framework of the ACP, MERCOSUR and dialogue with the Mediterranean countries, I have laid great emphasis on making the necessary contacts in the context of EU external policy, establishing contacts with the non-EU civil society organisations, and pursuing our commitment vis-à-vis the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (IAESC).

We have made considerable progress on this front, as I have found by visiting our partners in various countries and by participating in conferences there. Cooperation with the Economic and Social Council of China and with our Indian partners has been highly successful. There is also our cooperation with the Brazilian Economic and Social Development Council with which we signed a partnership agreement on the occasion of Minister **Tarso Genro**'s visit.

Better to defend the EESC's position and gather further information, I have urged that the Committee be granted observer status at the United Nations' ECOSOC and that it develop cooperation with the ILO. We have made considerable progress in this field too. A memo has been submitted to the Bureau on this subject as well as on the question, which I mentioned previously, of relations and cooperation with the Economic and Social Councils at European and international level. This memo will be discussed with the Commissioner responsible for external relations, **Chris Patten**.

2. **Improving the EESC's representativeness and credibility as institutional representative of civil society**

In the speech setting out my programme in December 2002 I expressed my determination to apply as soon as possible the autumn 2001 Committee decision authorising reinforced dialogue with the organisations representing civil society at European level. The ad hoc group set up in the spring to study the problem and propose solutions will hold its final meeting today, after submitting a report to the Bureau on the expected results in December. I am confident that **Mr Bloch-Lainé**'s report, which will be submitted to us in February, will enable us to make the right decisions. We will communicate these to our partners and the press at the conference to be held in March on the prospects for participatory democracy and civil dialogue.

The Union's new Constitution will call for structured civil dialogue. We must be prepared for this. It is vital for the Committee's reputation and its capacity to make its voice heard that we do not miss this opportunity.

Continuing the series of discussion and information meetings on the Convention begun under **Mr Göke Frerichs**' presidency has proved very valuable. This series has not yet been completed. Last week another meeting took place with the representatives of European organisations and networks, many of which responded to our invitation. **Jean-Luc Dehaene** again undertook to answer questions on the strategy to be adopted if the Intergovernmental Conference fails.

I have undertaken to convey the aspirations of the organisations and networks to the Irish Presidency. We are counting on its realism and commitment to ensure that the draft Constitution is finally adopted.

In general, I consider these meetings as constructive preparation for our future cooperation with the European civil society organisations and networks, which we would like to establish on an ongoing and systematic basis. The aim is to refine the method developed in the context of the Convention and extend it to other areas.

I have in the past raised the question of enabling European representative organisations not represented at the Committee to participate in drafting opinions (hearings, participation in work, etc.); this process will be implemented as part of structured cooperation; we will decide on the methods and procedures in February.

I have already announced that we will attempt to clarify the representativeness criteria for European civil society organisations and networks and request the referral of an exploratory opinion on representativeness and possibly other aspects of this issue. We will try to achieve this through an own-initiative opinion, which should be supported by the Commission. Work in this area has already started and **Anne-Marie Sigmund** has been appointed rapporteur.

I also asked that the organisations representing civil society be given the opportunity to use EESC infrastructure. This is now common practice. The experiment proved a success.

I would also like to mention the success of the dialogue and cooperation with ESCs and civil society at national and regional level in the Member States. My proposal that we work with national ESCs, making use of their contributions, on an opinion on experience of, and prospects for, the Lisbon process is being put into practice.

Another matter particularly close to my heart is increasing consultation with the European social partners and holding a major conference on Social Dialogue and Civil Dialogue – Demarcation and Complementarity in autumn 2003, in cooperation with them. This conference has been postponed until March 2004. Given the experience of debates on the European constitution and in agreement with our partners, we have decided to change its title to better define our objective: "Participatory democracy: state of play and perspectives opened up by the European Constitution".

We also drew on the conclusions of a seminar on Social dialogue – civil dialogue held in June with **Jacques Delors** and his "Our Europe" research group.

Moreover, an initial contact was established with the European Trade Union Confederation's (ETUC) new team; we need to continue and develop our work in this area. Similar contacts will also be established with UNICE's new team.

3. **Developing the Committee's resources and structures**

We need to prepare for the arrival of new members after enlargement and make the necessary organisational decisions (language regime, working methods, etc.). All of this is under way. The Bureau adopted the necessary measures in December 2002, and the secretariat is implementing them gradually.

As planned, we invited the representatives of civil society from the new Member States to our plenary session in May; and again in December.

At the same time, we have to move to the new Belliard buildings. The process has begun, although the deadline set a year ago has had to be put back a little. The move will be completed by May/June.

One of the areas covered by the EESC's consultative function is the consolidation of the activities of the Consultative Commission on Industrial Change. On the whole this starting phase has now been completed. We can now see that the decision taken during the previous term of office, which was not without problems at the time, was the right one. The Committee has benefited from the CCIC. Everything now depends on the way in which we exploit existing opportunities. In the course of enlargement, as provided for in the document establishing the CCIC and at the request of the countries concerned, we will extend the variety of topics and eliminate the historical restrictions imposed on the coal and steel sector.

I set a goal of drawing up a members' statute before enlargement. This was completed in December. The new statute is the result of several years' discussion. The three quaestors appointed under the new 2002 Rules of Procedure and responsible for drawing up a draft have done good work.

In contrast, as expected, we are still far from a proper financial statute for members. In recent months we have observed the European Parliament's efforts to obtain a statute for its MPs, without however gaining the Council's approval. Opinions on the subject vary within the Committee – I can understand why but not the resistance to any change – and we must learn from this experience.

On another front, regarding our determination to continue modernising the Committee's departments and their working methods, the secretariat is gradually implementing the Bureau's decisions on the matter.

Still regarding modernisation, I would remind you of my proposal to make the Bureau's activity more transparent. Have we made any progress in this direction? Yes, although only tentative steps.

I have carried out my intention of reporting regularly to the plenary assembly, and particularly informing you of political developments of interest to the Committee.

We also want to reorganise our budget and adapt our human and financial resources to the increase in the Committee's tasks. This is why we have taken an active part in the debate on the 2004 budget.

Here we should recall the decisive role played by our ad hoc Enlargement group. Unfortunately, the budgetary authority did not agree with us on all points, so the outcome did not meet all of our needs – but we must be satisfied with it.

My last point concerning the resources and structures we need to do high-quality work concerns the continuation of our efforts to develop an active and systematic communication and information strategy to enhance the profile and impact of the Committee's work.

For the most part this means implementing the communication plan adopted by the Bureau in 2001. This has now been done. In July 2003 the Bureau published a revised action plan. We are in the process of putting it into practice, and the communication group is doing sterling work.

4. **Reinforcing the EESC's presence in the debate on the future of Europe**

My first requirement was for the Committee's role to be recognised and its consultative function enhanced by the Convention and the next Intergovernmental Conference. We have made progress in this area. Although we have not achieved all of our ambitions, the draft constitution has great potential for boosting the Committee's role in the future (for instance the provisions concerning participatory democracy). **Henri Malosse's** report on the outcome of the Convention is noteworthy in this respect and should serve as a point of reference.

The report confirms that we were involved in and contributed constructively and actively to the debates on the future of Europe.

Sadly the Intergovernmental Conference has now started to unravel the draft Constitution, which we had judged as positive. The IGC's failure in December is evidence of an approach, on the part of some governments, guided only by national interest and of the shortcomings of the diplomatic method when planning Europe's future. It points to a lack of collective will to put the common European interest before national interests. Only a democratic process like the Convention which drew up the draft Constitution can further European integration and confer much enhanced legitimacy on the European project.

No agreement is still better than a watered down compromise, however.

As the institutional representative of organised civil society, it is our duty to remind governments and diplomats to follow the path laid down by the Convention. We expect all the Heads of State and Government to show a real commitment to integration and thus fall into line with the wishes of the majority of EU citizens who, according to the most recent Eurobarometer poll, are clearly in favour of the principle of a European Constitution and want to see faster European integration.

Dear Colleagues,

When I took up this position 15 months ago, I made it my mission to continue the policies of previous presidents in order to move forward and act innovatively.

I identified the following priorities: the defence and development of the European social model and the European model of society; the coordination of economic policies; the participation of civil society and its organisations in the political opinion-making process, legislation, and its implementation.

I particularly wanted to highlight the strengthening of EESC's function and role, its institutional position vis-à-vis the Union's legislative and executive institutions but also with vis-à-vis the Committee of the Regions and the European social partner organisations, in order to play convincingly the role of institutional forum representing, informing and offering a voice to organised civil society, allowing representatives of economic, social and civic organisations to be an integral part of the policy and decision-making process at EU level.

Obviously much still remains to be done but definite progress has been made. Our joint action, our initiatives and our decisions have, on the whole, enabled us to perform the task we set ourselves.

We should continue along this path and accomplish the tasks expected of us to the best of our abilities.
