



## **Priorities and projects for the 2003-2004 term of office**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As announced at the time of my inauguration, I am today presenting to you a work programme setting out the objectives on which the European Economic and Social Committee must make progress in the next two years in order to increase its capacity to accomplish its tasks and responsibilities effectively.

This programme will be part of the political timetable outlined in my inaugural speech of 23 October.

In that speech I mentioned the main problems and issues which the Committee would have to examine over the next two years. I should like to reiterate them here and also expand on a number of aspects, namely:

- the Constitution of the European Union,
- coping with geographical and cultural enlargement,
- the continued development of the European social model,
- systematic efforts to promote sustainability in all policy areas,
- a new impetus for economic growth, encouragement for entrepreneurial activity and strengthening of competitiveness,
- combating unemployment and poverty,
- the economic and social development of the Third World,
- the economic, social and political integration of immigrants,
- the maintenance and consolidation of peace.

We wish, in the interests of ordinary people and of the European Union, to make useful and high-quality contributions to solving these problems. If we are to do this, our recommendations and actions must be duly taken into account and accepted by the decision-makers at the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, which means that the Committee must continue its efforts to develop and improve its structure and working methods.

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Against this background, I think that there are four main objectives which we should pursue in a systematic and resolute way:

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 ESC's presence in the debate on the future of Europe.*

Clearly these four objectives are closely interlinked. Any progress in one area will also help us to move forward in the others.

If I dwell on this point, it is because it is sometimes suggested that we should concentrate on our initial task, that is to say that we should restrict ourselves to producing opinions. Other initiatives, it is argued, merely disperse and waste our energy.

There is no doubt that the basis of our work is advising the legislative bodies through our opinions, and yet we know from experience that the opinions we produce, however finely honed, will have little impact if the Committee, as an institution, is not in the media spotlight, if we, as its members, do not play an active part in the general political debate, if we do not command the support of those groups which it is our task to represent and which are the basis of our legitimacy and, finally, if we consequently do not enjoy the respect of the institutions which we are required to advise.

The personal commitment of each member of the Committee is essential if we are to win that respect. If we, the Committee's members, do not defend the interests of our institution at every available opportunity, we cannot expect the Committee to be treated with respect.

As the European Union has a complex political architecture, we have to make our voice heard through many channels if the message we seek to put across is to be heard.

In this spirit I would be grateful if you would bear in mind that the proposals contained in my programme are a package. They all focus on the same objective and are intended to help the European Economic and Social Committee carry out with increasing effectiveness its basic task of serving the interests of the people of the European Union.

Four weeks ago, on 12 November, I presented the outline of this programme to the Bureau, which debated it in detail. The Bureau was wholehearted in its support and also made a

number of suggestions which I have willingly taken on board. The content of the programme which I am about to present to you has already passed its first test, and I hope and trust, ladies and gentlemen, that today you will also lend your support to this programme and do everything in your power to enable us to implement it together over the coming two years.

Let me now turn to the four objectives. The first aim is:

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

In order to ensure that our consultative work is of the best possible quality and that it has the maximum possible impact, I intend to continue to promote necessary and appropriate selectivity in the work of the Committee, in line with the Bureau decision of last July.

If only because of the limited resources available to us, we need to give priority to subjects, questions and issues of major political and social relevance and on which the Committee is expected to express its views. It would be perverse for us to draw up and issue opinions which change nothing, or opinions in which no one has the slightest interest, or on subjects where we have nothing to add to the debate beyond a mere reiteration of discussions which have already taken place elsewhere. Instead, we should invest the energy and resources thus saved in better preparation – for example via study groups and hearings – and in better promotion of the work of the Committee in political circles and with the public.

The Bureau has a particular responsibility for ensuring that the requirement of selectivity is properly applied, as it is the Bureau which, in accordance with our Rules of Procedure, determines the subjects which we are to tackle. In practice, however, it is up to the group presidents in cooperation with the section presidents to ensure that our work stays on the right track. The previous Bureau adopted clear decisions on the subject, with specific recommendations which need to be followed.

Yesterday I met the section presidents for an informal exchange of views, in the course of which I discussed with them the support they could give, each in their particular area of competence and working together towards the collective goal, to ensure that together we can lay the foundation for positive selectivity.

Similarly, we have to intervene with a view to obtaining more requests for exploratory opinions, from the Commission, the European Parliament, future presidencies and other Union institutions, bodies and agencies, as well as the social partners, working through a sustained dialogue at different levels and focusing on the legislative and executive institutions.

Thus, if we are able to contribute to the shaping of decisions and policies at an early stage, we will be all the more effective and influential. In order to do this, however, we have to be active and maintain sound, high-quality relations with the main decision-makers at the various levels.

I consider it extremely important for us to make strenuous efforts to conclude partnership and cooperation agreements with the Council and the Parliament. Thanks to a similar agreement, our cooperation with the Commission has been established on a firm foundation, yielding excellent results. Clearly, the Council and the Parliament have different constraints and different decision-making procedures. In this way the agreements we set out to conclude with these institutions, and which we are discussing with the Council and the European Parliament, will not take the same form, and it will be necessary to adapt the cooperation arrangements and procedures to which we commit ourselves to the respective environments.

With regard to the European Parliament, we are following the action plan approved by the Bureau in the spring. Thanks to these efforts, a number of improvements have already been made in our working relationship. After the discussions with the EP president, **Pat Cox**, during his visit to our plenary session in September, we can look forward, with his support, to an acceleration of this process.

In relation to the Council of Ministers, we are attempting to establish more systematic cooperation with the successive presidencies of the Union. Initially with the Greek government, which in the course of our initial discussions proved very amenable to involving our Committee in various events and initiatives in the first half of 2003. And subsequently with the Italian and Irish governments, with which we have already established contact. In this context, we obviously draw on the valuable cooperation of the economic and social councils of the various countries.

Our Committee has everything to gain, and its work will be all the richer for it, if it continues on the path of developing specific cooperation agreements with the other institutions, bodies, agencies and foundations of the European Union. Our partners in these agreements will also benefit.

The Dublin European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, whose director visited me in November, is an example which springs to mind. On that occasion we were able to explore the full range of our potential common interests, offering an excellent basis for the future coordination of our work, particularly as regards the activities of our new Consultative Commission on Industrial Change, which began work on 28 November. We intend to develop our cooperation, particularly in relation to employment, training and working conditions.

An example even closer to home is the Committee of the Regions with which we share far more than our joint services. The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions have parallel tasks. Both of them serve as an interface, with civil society organisations in the one case and local and regional authorities in the other, representing their respective interests and aspirations.

I think that we should therefore undertake joint activities with the CoR. Why should we not from time to time draw up joint opinions on subjects of particular interest both to civil society and to the local and regional authorities? We could also hold joint conferences to discuss subjects of interest to both Committees.

Last week I had a detailed discussion with the CoR president and Leader of Birmingham City Council, **Sir Albert Bore**, on our future cooperation, for which the prospects are very encouraging, and we will shortly be resuming our discussions, with the focus on specific cooperation proposals.

I also think that we urgently need to define the Committee's role and external relations priorities in the general framework of the Union's foreign policy. As you know, we carry out a great variety of activities in this area. In doing this, we are not acting independently but rather within the framework of the European Union's foreign policy, which we support, attempting to help establish contacts with civil-society organisations in all states or groups of states with which the EU maintains relations.

Today the implications and consequences of external policy are such that it plays a key role even in the Union, which is the reason why I am making a specific commitment in this area in conjunction with the REX section.

The exchanges which take place at our conferences, joint consultative committees, round tables and other forums are aimed primarily at better mutual understanding by making it possible for each of the partners to understand what motivates the other party, the problems he faces and the solutions he seeks.

Secondly, these meetings provide an opportunity to look for ways of jointly solving existing difficulties and exploring avenues for possible assistance, as well as an opportunity for us to learn more about each other. Finally, in more general terms, these meetings are about establishing the conditions for development, in the sense of a positive image of society, both from an economic and social, and from a cultural and political point of view.

It is in this light that our commitment to the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions should be seen which, going beyond the relationships we enter into in supporting the European Union's external policy, also offers us the opportunity of entering into contact and engaging in dialogue with civil-society institutions in states throughout the five continents. In this context we are pursuing our aim of making a more active contribution, and making our voice heard, at the United Nations. That is why I have renewed our request for observer status at the United Nations' ECOSOC with a view to official observer status at the International Labour Organisation.

A few days ago I had the opportunity to speak to the director-general of the ILO, **Juan Somavia**, and to the chairman of its governing body, **Lord Brett**. In view of the possible convergences and synergies between the ILO and the EESC, we agreed to follow up the results of the conference on Human Rights in the Workplace which, by agreement with Commissioner **Pascal Lamy**, we held last week. The conference was a great success by the way.

That now brings me to the second objective:

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

We need to make efforts to apply as soon as possible the Committee decision of autumn 2001 concerning increased dialogue with organisations representing civil society at European level. I consider that the dialogue and information meetings which we have been holding since last spring with the agreement of the Presidium of the European Convention can serve as a test in this connection. The test has so far been encouraging, dispelling reservations both on our part and on that of our partners. The time is now ripe to embark on the next stage and to refine the method developed in the framework of the Convention and extend it to other areas.

It is against this same background that, in accordance with the decision referred to earlier, we must enable European-level representative organisations not represented at the Committee, particularly representatives of transnational European NGO networks, to participate in the preparation of our opinions, for example by means of regular meetings and hearings, and by inviting them to participate, particularly in the work of study or working groups. We need to develop appropriate procedures to this end. The new Rules of Procedure which we adopted in September contain provisions enabling us to go further, for example by the establishment of a "consultative commission" and thus to be the de facto representative of organised civil society at European level.

Whatever procedures are adopted to involve these players, it goes without saying that it will be up to the members of the Committee ultimately to decide on the form and content of the opinions which we adopt. We are speaking here of participation in discussions and not co-decision. I am convinced that any opinion which has benefited from the input of the parties directly concerned by its subject matter will generally be better founded and more credible as a result.

With this in mind, we clearly need to define the criteria for the representation of European-level civil-society organisations and networks. The question here is: who is speaking on whose behalf? Such clarification is also in the interests of both the Commission and the Parliament, as both institutions will continue, independently of any activities pursued by the EESC, to conduct dialogues with particular groups or bodies on sectoral problems and specific projects. I could therefore well imagine the Parliament or the Commission, or both of them, asking the EESC to draw up an exploratory opinion on this question of representativeness and possibly on other related issues.

Clearly we also need to offer the use of EESC infrastructure to organisations representative of civil society, particularly to transnational networks and forums, to the extent that there is a specific wish to cooperate on content. We need to discuss the question with the partners concerned and to study with them the draft procedural rules, which need to be drawn up as soon as possible. We also need to look into the financial and budgetary impact.

This is also related to the continued development of dialogue and cooperation with economic and social councils and civil societies at national or regional level in the Member States. Over the last few years we have made significant progress in this area, the results of which became clear at the last meeting of presidents and secretaries-general of these bodies held in Dublin on 29 November. In Dublin we were able to agree on a common strategy for the objectives to be pursued at the Convention and the procedures to be followed. A decision was also taken to make a joint approach to the Heads of Government on the basis of a declaration signed by all the presidents.

Another important result was the agreement to work together throughout the coming year on the open method of coordination. The aim will be to draw up, using contributions from the national councils, an opinion on experiences of, and prospects for, the Lisbon process three years on.

The activation of relations with the European social partners also falls within the scope of this objective. In view of the role assigned to the European social partners in the European legislative process and the important place which they occupy in the framework of the transnational civil society organisations, it is essential that the Committee as a whole consult with them. It seems to me that it would be possible to reach an agreement with UNICE, whereby both organisations would set up restricted working groups to clarify our respective relations, as the European Convention is expected to require us to do. I propose that towards the end of next year we hold, in collaboration with the European organisations of social partners and, if appropriate, other interested civil-society organisations, a major international conference on Social Dialogue and Civil Dialogue – Demarcation and Complementarity, which would be a follow-up to other meetings of a similar kind. Here too there is a need for clarification, which needs to be satisfied in the interests of the social partners and the whole of civil society.

My third objective is:

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

During my term of office as president the Committee will face a number of challenges and deadlines which will determine its work during this period:

- the accession of 10 new Member States, which will mean about 100 new members for the EESC in the first half of 2004, which will require preparation in the form of detailed discussion of the

decisions needing to be taken, e.g. regarding language arrangements and working methods. We also plan to invite representatives of civil-society organisations from the future Member States to our plenary session next May,

- the move to the Belliard building, scheduled for the first half of 2004,
- the consolidation of the activities of the Consultative Commission on Industrial Change, which began work on November 28.

Against this background and in particular in the light of the expected results of the European Convention and the challenges arising from the EESC's new role as institutional representative of organised civil society, I commit myself, Ladies and Gentlemen, during my term of office as president of our Committee to the following:

- the rapid launch of work on the members' statute, which ought to be adopted in autumn 2003, or at the latest spring 2004,
- the pursuit of an acceptable financial statute for members,
- preparation on a number of levels for the arrival of some 100 new members from the new Member States (and a large number of officials) after accession,
- the continued modernisation of services and working methods (application of recent Bureau decisions),
- greater transparency of the Bureau's activities and a regular report to the plenary assembly on the subject,
- the reorganisation of our budget and the adaptation of our financial and human resources to the Committee's increased tasks,
- and finally, continuation of the development of the strategy for communication and active and systematic provision of information, in order to raise the profile and consequently the impact of the Committee's work. I would ask you to take a look at the communication plan adopted by the Bureau in 2001 as communication concerns all of you directly. Without your individual contributions in your respective areas of responsibility our institutional effort will not have the necessary impact. After the EESC's move to its new building in the Rue Belliard, which I hope will take place in spring 2004, we will find ourselves in a geographically highly privileged position between Parliament, Council and Commission, which will create new opportunities for our information and communication activities which we must exploit with determination.

And finally, my fourth objective is:

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

Over the next two years decisions will be taken, at the Convention and later by the intergovernmental conference, which will determine the future shape of the European Union as well as the position of each of its institutions in the political system. It is essential that on this occasion the role of the Committee be clearly confirmed and recognised, internally and externally, and that its consultative function be reinforced.

In this connection it is essential, both for the EESC and for organised civil society, that the Committee itself formulate and vigorously defend its interests with regard to its status and function.

This work must follow on from the basic decisions taken during the previous term of office but must also be innovative.

There is no need for me to dwell on this now, as I dealt with the subject in detail in my speech of 23 October.

I will restrict myself to the main questions on which the Committee must make its views heard at the Convention and, in the light of the intergovernmental conference which will take the final decisions on the future Constitution, by the governments: They include:

- the defence and development of the European social model or the European model of society,
- the coordination of economic policy,
- the participation of civil society and its organisations in the process of shaping public opinion, in legislation, its implementation and in various decisions, i.e. the rules of governance and civil and social dialogue,
- the function and role of the EESC, i.e. its institutional position vis-a-vis the EU institutions, but also vis-a-vis the CoR and the European social partners, its remit and its mission, its rights and instruments, its membership etc.

The subject is dealt with continuously and methodically by our observers at the Convention, of whom I am one, together with **Mr Frerichs**, **Mrs Sigmund**, **Mr Sepi**, **Mr Regaldo** and **Mr Ohlson**, as well as by the subcommittee which we set up to monitor the Convention's work and to draw conclusions from it with regard to the operation of the Committee. The plenary assembly will be regularly briefed on these questions. Having had the opportunity to meet the president of the European Convention, **Mr Giscard d'Estaing**, at a Convention meeting a short time after my election, I have taken it upon myself to invite him to address a forthcoming plenary session and to debate with us the progress and development of the work on the European Constitution.

To conclude the presentation of my programme, I should like to say how pleased I will be if, thanks to your commitment and the support of all EESC members and staff, we succeed in enabling the EESC, in the interests of the Union, its Member States and indeed the people of Europe, successfully to perform its role as *"institutional forum for representing, informing and expressing the views of organised civil society, thereby allowing the representatives of Member States' economic, social and civic organisations to be an integral part of the policy-forming and decision-making process at Community level"* (EESC Resolution of 19 September, paragraph 1).

That is the goal for which I would ask for your support and active participation.

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