



European Economic and Social Committee

TRIPARTISM IN AN ENLARGED EUROPEAN UNION

*Elsinore, Denmark
29 and 30 October 2002*

Statement by Mr Briesch

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The term “tripartism”, as the conference programme rightly notes, is used in different contexts to mean different things. The point is also made, however, that, in the present setting, tripartism is to be taken to mean cooperation, consultation and/or negotiation between employers, employees and public authorities.

As president of the European Economic and Social Committee, I am very happy to have been invited by the organisers to attend this conference. My sincere thanks therefore go to the Danish Employment Ministry and the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. Being asked here today gives me the opportunity firstly, to outline one particular kind of tripartism practiced in the EESC; and, secondly, to report on the special kind of cooperation and consultation through which our Committee helps the EU’s legislative and executive institutions to take account of civil society’s experiences, expectations, interests and proposals.

The European Economic and Social Committee is *the* paradigm of tripartism in the EU process of participation and decision-making. It is organised civil society’s European-level institutional forum for consultation, representation, information and expression, enabling representatives of Member States’ economic, social and civic organisations to play an integral part in the process of shaping policy and decisions at Community level.

The Committee is a consultative body set up by the Rome Treaties in 1957. It is the only European-level assembly not linked to political parties. Its main task is to advise the three major institutions (Council of the European Union, European Commission and European Parliament). It is mandatory for the Committee to be consulted on those issues stipulated in the Treaties and in all cases where the institutions deem it appropriate. The Committee is also increasingly being asked by the Council presidency, the Commission and the European Parliament to draw up exploratory opinions before proposals are adopted or policy decisions are taken. It can also issue opinions and draw up information reports on its own initiative. Currently, the Committee produces almost 150 opinions a year on a wide range of subjects.

Over time, the Committee has acquired two additional, complementary roles, namely:

- to involve civil society organisations more in the European venture, and
- to boost the role of civil society organisations in non-member countries or groups of countries, including the candidate countries for membership, where it has established - and is continuing to develop - ongoing contacts and structured dialogue with civil society organisations, not least the social partners. The Committee is also encouraging the establishment of consultative machinery in these countries and regions.

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The Committee's special relations with Member States' economic and social councils and similar bodies, and with organised civil society in the candidate countries and in the non-EU countries and geographical groupings with which the European Union maintains structured relations, enhance the added value and legitimacy of its action in favour of a politically more accessible, more transparent and more participatory Europe. The close relations which the Committee has established with civil society organisations not represented in its midst also help boost this added value and legitimacy. The Committee intends to strengthen these relations.

The Committee is currently made up of 222 members split into three groups. Traditionally the employers' and the employees' groups represent the social partners (employers' and trade union organisations), while the "various interests group" brings together representatives from other sectors of economic and social life, including bodies representing craftsmen, farmers, SMEs and the professions.

Nevertheless, the Committee's membership is not static. It changes with each renewal of the Committee so as to reflect changes in organised civil society in the Member States. Representatives of consumer bodies, associations promoting the rights of disabled people and combating exclusion, family associations, environmental protection bodies and even NGOs have also over time contributed to the wealth of experience represented in the Committee since its establishment.

This tripartite organisation adopted by the Committee from the outset encourages permanent, structured dialogue on almost all the issues on the Union agenda. The Committee is thus an excellent forum for cooperation on proposed legislation, and helps improve the transparency of the European Union's decision-making processes. What is involved here of course is not social, but civic dialogue – i.e. on the one hand, dialogue among the various economic, social, cultural and civic players and, on the other, dialogue within civil society, including the social partners and the institutions.

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Committee opinions are frequently taken into account by the decision-making bodies – a fact recognised recently, for example, by **Commissioner Diamantopoulou** who sincerely thanked the Committee for these opinions that have "*contributed so much over the years to the quality of European decision-making.*" Moreover, the influence of the Committee's stance often goes beyond the limits of the Commission document being examined in an opinion. Exploratory and own-initiative opinions are of particular interest; their value is often rooted in the fact that they raise the awareness of the European institutions and national authorities about subjects which have not hitherto attracted

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much, if any, of their attention. The Commission president, **Mr Prodi**, for instance, recently praised the “*excellent*” and “*most inspiring*” exploratory opinion which the Commission had requested on *options for the reform of pension schemes*.

The Committee’s contribution to European integration is threefold:

- Firstly, members represent the Union's various social, economic and societal realities. They have an in-depth knowledge of the issues involved and put forward proposals in the light of their assessments, analyses and experiences "in the field." This pool of expertise is backed up by specific working methods, such as the use of study groups, experts and hearings.
- The Committee is a place for hammering out solutions based on the search for compromise, even where the initial stances are divergent or even diametrically opposite. The Committee provides both a forum for dialogue and an institutional platform allowing representatives of economic, social and civic organisations from the Member States to play an integral part in the Community decision-making process. Especially through its opinions, it is involved in defining and implementing European Union policy.
- Its members’ professional origins mean that the Committee is in a position to communicate the questions and aspirations of civil society organisations to the European institutions; furthermore, it constitutes a communications network which makes it a valuable information source for these same organisations.

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On the key issues addressed at this conference - not least **employment and social inclusion** - the Committee wholeheartedly backs the idea of **partnership** and **tripartism** at every level :

- The Committee has, for instance, repeatedly stressed that implementation of the sustainable **employment strategy** established at the Lisbon summit is contingent on sharing responsibilities for achieving the set objectives between the public sector, the private sector and government in order to secure a coherent approach to the broad economic policy guidelines, the employment guidelines and the national action plans, with the full involvement of organised civil society. The Committee has focused its efforts in particular on benchmarking, on involving the social partners and other key players, on participation and the reorganisation of work, on concerted local employment projects, on the social economy and on the development of new knowledge-based services. The Committee has also particularly welcomed European Commission moves to strengthen the local dimension of the European employment strategy and the introduction at local

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level of action plans and territorial pacts involving all the players concerned – local authorities, associations, social partners – in implementing the local strategies.

However, the Committee has also expressed concern about existing arrangements for involving the social partners in drawing up the employment guidelines and transposing them into national action plans. Indeed, the social partners still have only limited input into drawing up and transposing the guidelines. To boost their involvement, Member States should bring them in at an earlier stage. As things stand, they are often not consulted until governments have already drawn up the national action plans.

- On the issue of **social inclusion**, the Committee has stressed that the stakeholders involved in the ongoing programmes at every level should include the Community authorities, the Member States, the regions and local administrations, the social partners and genuinely representative NGOs working with the excluded, but also those actually suffering exclusion and poverty, who should be given the opportunity to organise themselves and take part in the programmes.

- At a broader level, the Committee feels that the formulation of a “common political vision of social protection in Europe” is an extremely important objective affecting the whole of society. Effective tools are therefore needed to guarantee a truly democratic – that is to say participatory – process. The strong and responsible involvement of all the interested parties is thus an essential element in the modernisation of these systems as part of a concerted strategy. The Committee has also reiterated its deep conviction that any adaptation, modernisation or reform of pension schemes must be carried out with the active, aware and informed involvement of the social players, since that is the only way to create the conditions for a substantial consensus on the necessary choices to be made at national level.

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Through the role assigned to the European Economic and Social Committee by the Treaties, and thanks to its broad membership and their expertise, the Committee constitutes at European level a valuable forum for representing and informing civil society organisations and expressing their views. As such, it provides **a vital bridge between Europe and people** involved in the voluntary sector, trade unions, federations and a wide range of associations.

As an instrument of “participatory democracy” at European level, the Committee thus guarantees a pluralist, participatory model of civil society, allowing its representative organisations to play an integral part in the decision-making process. By enhancing the legitimacy of this process, the Committee is helping reduce the “democratic deficit”.

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The Nice Treaty, once it is in force, will consolidate the Committee in its role of providing a bridge between Europe and civil society. Indeed the Treaty stipulates that *“the Committee shall consist of representatives of the various economic and social components of organised civil society, and in particular representatives of producers, farmers, carriers, workers, dealers, craftsmen, professional occupations, consumers and the general interest”*.

Recognising this, the Commission White Paper on European Governance states that *“the Economic and Social Committee must play a role in developing a new relationship of mutual responsibility between the institutions and civil society, in line with the changes to Article 257 of the EC Treaty agreed at Nice”*, including *“a more proactive role in examining policy, for example through the preparation of exploratory reports”* prior to proposals being adopted by the Commission.

The Treaty has also provided for an increase in the number of members - up to 350 - when the European Union is enlarged. This will mean that the various elements of the Committee will be properly represented within an enlarged Europe. The Committee will also be able to play its role fully as a forum for participatory democracy in the EU.

With an eye to enlargement, we have for some time now been successfully working together with civil society organisations - including the social partners - from the future Member States through the Joint Consultative Committees that have been set up with most candidate countries. We use the regular meetings and cooperation with our partners to help develop the national machinery and organisational capacity that they will need to meet the challenge of membership.

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The Committee has taken steps to enable it to play to the full its role in the European Convention. The Convention - which began work on 28 February 2002 - has the task of establishing a new institutional architecture for the Union.

As part of this process, and in addition to the active involvement of its three observatories in the Convention proceedings, the Committee is also promoting several types of structured dialogue, or co-operation, with organised civil society, focusing on the national civil society organisations represented within its ranks, the Member States' economic and social councils and similar institutions, civil society organisations in the candidate countries and European organised civil society networks.

Thus, in cooperation with the Convention, the Committee is organising information and dialogue meetings between the Convention's members and European civil society organisations and networks. This dialogue will continue throughout the Convention's work.

The Committee hopes to see a new definition of the constitutional foundations of the European Union which reflects a balance between cultural diversity and political unity and preserves traditions and identities. It is also essential to make major strides forward in terms of democratic legitimacy and improving and protecting citizens' rights.
