



Speech by Dr Göke Frerichs
President of the European Economic and Social Committee
at the reception in the Palais d'Egmont 24 April 2002

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I should like to extend a warm welcome to you and to thank you for taking up my invitation to meet members and staff of the European Economic and Social Committee.

The European Economic and Social Committee is an assembly of representatives of civil society organisations. Our members are drawn from employers' and trade union organisations, from consumer organisations, charitable associations and cooperatives, and from organisations representing the professions, the craft, farming and research sectors and the field of environmental protection. Their task and ambition is to bring the views, expectations, interests and ideas of these civil society organisations to bear in opinion-forming and decision-making within the EU institutions. We thereby seek the most effective cooperation and partnership possible with the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, which the Committee serves as a consultative body.

For some time now, we in the European Economic and Social Committee have been working hard to fulfil our task and ambition ever more effectively through internal reforms and by carving out an appropriate political profile.

As you know, our Committee has been asked by the Laeken European Council – as part of its work – to play an active part in developing a consensus on the future shape of the Union by sending observers to the European Convention. In this role, our observers draw support from the Committee's ability – as a catalyst and conduit – to give expression to the views both of national civil societies and of the transnational, European civil society that is gradually emerging.

The praesidium of the European Convention has also sought our services to facilitate dialogue between the Convention and civil society networks and organisations. We hosted an initial meeting just a few days ago, attended by the Convention vice-chairman, **Jean-Luc Dehaene**, and other members.

We feel that such gatherings – which we shall be hosting regularly over the coming months in tandem with Convention meetings – are the initial expression of a new form

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of involvement for those sections of civil society that do not have a seat on the Committee, but whose experience and commitment we urgently need to underpin the representativeness and credibility of our opinions.

In the same way, we are also strengthening cooperation with the economic and social councils that exist in eleven of the fifteen Member States. Nationally, these bodies play a role similar to that of the EESC at Union level.

As part of the enlargement process, our Committee is no less committed to efforts to strike up dialogue with civil society representatives from countries seeking to join the European Union. The aim is to develop mutual understanding and joint ideas that may be helpful in preparing for accession.

From the candidate countries, I am particularly pleased to welcome the co-presidents of the joint consultative committees, who took part in our consultations today with **Commissioner Verheugen**.

We have also built up systematic, institutionalised relations with civil society partners from the groups of countries and regional associations with which the Union is engaged in structured dialogue – i.e. the Mediterranean countries, the ACP states, the countries of Mercosur and Central America, and, for instance, India.

As a final point, I would also mention that, when the ECSC Treaty expires on 23 July this year, we shall be carrying on the flame of this first European Community – from which the European Union has sprung forth – by taking over the remaining tasks of the ECSC Consultative Committee, thereby harnessing its tremendous experience and putting it to good use in the future.

Ladies and gentlemen,

From the few points I have made, it is clear that the European Economic and Social Committee has definitely embarked on a new phase in its more than forty-year history.

All of you here tonight as our guests are linked with us in many, very different ways. Through your attentiveness and concern, through your readiness to cooperate and your advice and criticism, you help us fulfil the additional tasks we face as the Union grows ever deeper and wider.

We are grateful for your support. I hope that this evening's discussions will help bring us closer together and further strengthen our mutual understanding.
