



*European Economic and Social Committee*

**Conference on**  
***"Participatory democracy: current situation and opportunities  
provided by the European Constitution"***

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**CLOSING PLENARY SESSION**

**CLOSING SPEECH**  
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*Seul le texte prononcé fait foi*  
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*Check Against Delivery*

When I think back to the 1999 European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) conference on civil society, when I measure the ground covered in the meantime, and consider **Professor Beate Kohler-Koch**'s presentation, I cannot help noticing the huge number of theoretical, institutional, political and sociological problems that present themselves.

Needless to say, non-governmental organisations did not wait until 1999 to manifest themselves and act. Some had been active and well established in the European Community for many years prior to that date. However, even I realise as an outsider that non-governmental organisations' sphere of action has broadened considerably and, today, you constitute a wealth of experience and a wellspring of hope. Furthermore, I am well aware that whilst some non-governmental organisations are amongst us today, there are others who more often than not make their presence felt in the street but who have also helped alter the course of events. This should also not be disregarded as a social and political phenomenon. I therefore attribute the failure of Cancun to events which have occurred at social summits in recent months. Yet again, this must not be forgotten.

It seems to me that you pointedly chose the participatory concept despite the fact that it has been with us for quite some time. You also went out of your way not to set it against representative democracy.

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However, I did hear a few participants challenge the representative value of political parties and I should like to come back to this at the end of my speech and, in so far as this may be necessary, attempt to rehabilitate politics.

I am, however, most struck by the promising advances made over the years. I shall restrict myself to the main points.

Firstly, the draft Constitution and, in particular, Articles 44 to 51. We are all aware that the Constitution has not as yet been adopted. Its text will, nevertheless, serve as a reference point. The drafting process – for which I take no credit – has been painstaking. Its language is measured and ambiguity has been reduced to an absolute minimum. It is a very good text that offers hope for the future.

Secondly, I would like to draw attention to the body of rules adopted by the Commission regarding consultation that **Mr Nymand Christensen** outlined earlier on in the full knowledge that it will ultimately give rise to more criticism than satisfaction. And yet I believe that the process embarked on by the Commission one year ago is also promising.

I shall not comment on the European Parliament. I know that it was in session today, and this may explain why I have learnt nothing about relations with Parliament.

I have also noticed that some of you have welcomed the open method of coordination and why not? It is true that in certain spheres, such as social exclusion, open coordination has created avenues for non-governmental organisations to communicate their concerns, expectations and analyses or experiences. It has also facilitated participation.

However, since we are here to build Europe, I hope that you will allow me to express a few reservations regarding this open method of coordination. I should like to do so for the simple reason that although this method of coordination is greeted with much enthusiasm in the intergovernmental sphere, it would mean taking a step backwards in matters pertaining to European integration. For instance, applying the open method of coordination to the economic pillar of economic and monetary union, as requested by some, would mean forgoing economic and monetary union and in some respects would create illusions.

This is why the open method of coordination must be used with care and in moderation, if you will allow me to repeat an expression that has been used elsewhere.

Jean Michel Bloch-Lainé's extremely interesting report places the EESC at the heart of the civil dialogue, and this is obviously where the difficulties begin. However, these difficulties must not be over-estimated because the EESC, as far as I can understand, does not seek to exercise a monopoly as the representative or mouthpiece of NGOs. It also tells politicians that this need not become a pretext for ending their practice of consulting NGOs directly.

Nevertheless, and irrespective of what one may say regarding the composition of the EESC - and I am not in favour of changing it - there should be a forum which, thanks to this liaison group, can channel the aspirations and demands of NGOs where these are not catered for by the intelligent processes that are in place for allowing civil society to make itself heard at all times. Naturally, and here people will draw their own conclusions, there is no need to institutionalise matters or make anything compulsory. However, I believe that the EESC's proposal will lead to progress.

Yet again, and this will be my second point, we cannot discuss participatory democracy without mentioning the need for a healthy

participatory democracy. On this point, I should like to mention a few concerns arising from my own experience.

First of all, the door should remain open to new NGOs. Why? Simply because our society is a living entity that evolves and expresses new concerns. Society has its shortcomings and sometimes warns us of impending tragedies. As a result, citizens form new groups. If we institutionalise to the point where the door is closed to such new groups, we will stifle society and inhibit true participation.

Again - and this is a point which has already been made but to which I would like to come back to - social dialogue must not only be sustained but encouraged because, at present, the balance of power in Europe is not conducive to social dialogue and the social partners. I frequently hear the political classes question the representative value of trade unions and the need for social dialogue or negotiations at national or European level. Times have changed, they say. On the one hand there is globalisation and on the other there is the micro-economy. Companies should negotiate, but at their own level.

I believe that if the social dialogue were to fall by the wayside, if the accession of new countries lacking experience of the post-war European social model were to reduce the importance of the social dialogue, democracy itself would suffer because the political classes

and public opinion have already started to drift apart. The authorities are already anxious. They conduct public opinion polls twice a day. They sometimes try to appease public opinion with little lies that can turn into big lies if things go badly. But there is nothing, and there would be nothing, were it not for social and civil dialogue.

This is why social dialogue was established, why it is an integral part of the European social model, and why it was enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty, thus permitting the social partners to promote agreements and, by extension, legislation. This point goes beyond any personal affinities we may have. And it is why social dialogue is justified and must be promoted. It warrants political action from social partners, but not exclusively from them. It is vital for the future.

The third point I would like to stress regarding the need for a healthy participatory democracy is that excessive dialogue can kill dialogue. At some point it must be brought to an end. Needless to say, there will always be someone who is left unsatisfied, whose opinion will have been sidelined, who will seek another forum to express himself. But allow me a cautionary note here: There are countries that have failed to engage seriously in dialogue with their social partners and NGOs but continue to create more and more forums. As a result, social partners and NGOs are bogged down by dialogue but cannot move forwards. There therefore comes a time to be frank and say “Very

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well, we have met, this is our point of view, which we do not share entirely with you". The option to end dialogue must exist because further discussion could lead to over regulation. Certainly, you, today, are in no way to blame here but I draw your attention to the consequences that compromise between governments can have on certain texts. Consider carefully what becomes of European legislation that attempts to respect all opinions through compromise. It results in inapplicable and controversial texts that place an unreasonable burden on companies and inhibit action.

Dear friends, democracy must strive towards simplicity. Simplicity is what makes it possible for the ordinary citizen to make sense of the joint venture that his life has become. This brings me to a point that has not been underlined today but which I consider to be important. I shall summarise it in one simple sentence: Non-governmental organisations serve as a diverse and dynamic network for European democracy. You have heard the usual refrain: the European Union must come closer to its citizens. This requires the political classes to work towards simplicity: fewer texts, fewer complex texts. However, it also implies a healthy social fabric, and this is where you have an essential role to play. The growing divide that I have already mentioned undermines democratic stability and effectiveness. When we are left with a situation where government is in conflict with public opinion, the situation becomes fragile. I could cite

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contemporary examples to demonstrate my point but would prefer to avoid controversy.

Of course, the institutions can help to fill this vacuum and, upon reflection, so too could the application of the principle of subsidiarity, provided that the system is not abused or used to prevent the transfer of power to the EU if this is the level at which added value can be provided. But civil society organisations, in the broadest sense, are the stuff of which the very fabric of European democracy is made.

Today, the issue of the moment, be it on a national or a European level, is “creating society” – an apparently ambiguous expression. There is a need for Europeans to re-discover their fellows, to work with them and to avoid a feeling of isolation vis-à-vis the intimidating process of globalisation, and a feeling of helplessness that ends in disenchantment with democracy and a loss of political credibility. This is where civil society comes to the rescue of democracy and society. This point must be stressed because, although it has nothing to do with your concrete tasks, it constitutes a transition towards a more vibrant, dynamic and less inward-looking society. **Professor Kohler-Kohl** aptly describes such a society as mobilising its resources to meet political objectives because there is a real need to rehabilitate politics within the context of this debate.

Politics is open to criticism. It is not perfect but it has responsibilities as the final decision-maker. The political classes have obligations. They must present the European project as clearly as possible. Without a project, resources cannot be mobilised and there can be no constructive debate. Debates cannot always focus on minor points. What is the European Union's project today, a project in which you will be engaged and which you will modify as active citizens? Civil society will define itself according to this project. It will criticise, advise and reveal shortcomings. It will, as I have already mentioned, even take to the streets. In other words, it will fuel and undoubtedly influence this process. Yet this joint venture re-affirms all the questions that preoccupy us: bioethics, the environment, and social exclusion, all these issues are re-positioned within this process. The project does not promise a perfect future. However, its very existence reinforces the mobilisation of resources and makes NGOs more relevant. Naturally, the project goes well beyond economic thinking per se.

No one is better placed than I am to know that economic criteria have often been used in the building of Europe but make no mistake, the decision to use economic criteria was inspired by other factors. It was inspired by a desire for peace and mutual understanding amongst peoples. It was rooted in the need for our societies to adapt or face marginalisation. It was motivated by the need to safeguard our

influence beyond the borders of Europe. And this must be recalled today because it has been forgotten by some countries that wrote a certain letter. Its inspiration was the economic and social cohesion that has become a pillar of the Treaty. Its inspiration, therefore, lay elsewhere. I shall conclude with one example. Enlargement on such a large scale will undoubtedly present problems but permit me to say that, to me and to many of you, it is primarily a historical opportunity and a matter to celebrate. If matters were presented in this manner, though in fact they are not, things would be different. Your vast reserves of energy and ideas are indispensable to Europe, and celebrating enlargement would increase your effectiveness and relevance beyond measure.

I thank you for your attention.