



Comité économique et social européen

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

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OPENING PLENARY SESSION

OPENING REMARKS
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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi

Check Against Delivery

It gives me great pleasure to be with you today to open this conference on participatory democracy. It is an issue that is very close to my own heart and I can only applaud the Economic and Social Committee for the apt choice of subject.

We are entering an interesting and exciting time in the life of the European Union. In less than two months, the Irish Presidency will have the honour and privilege of welcoming ten new Member States into the European Union, and we look forward to the celebration of the "Day of Welcomes" on 1 May. And of course work is also continuing on efforts to conclude a new Constitutional Treaty for the European Union.

I will touch briefly on where matters stand on the IGC a little later. First, however, I would like to address an issue that is very much to the fore of all of our thinking at this crucial time in the Union's history.

Communicating Europe

It should be taken for granted that it is increasingly important that EU citizens are both well informed about developments in their Union and more directly involved in decisions taken by the EU.

For over fifty years citizens in Member States have enjoyed an unparalleled period of peace and prosperity. Our Union has proved that democracies and peoples can be brought closer together for the common good. However, as we are all aware, public opinion surveys and media reporting indicate that many Europeans feel disconnected from the EU and consider that they are poorly

informed about and involved in decisions taken by the EU on issues which affect their lives.

I strongly believe that the EU cannot develop in the future if its citizens feel that they are not sufficiently informed about decisions taken at the Union and how it operates.

As Presidency, we have been giving a great deal of thought to ways in which we might begin to address these difficult questions. For this reason, we have decided to convene a Ministerial Conference on Communicating Europe, which will take place on April 7/8 in Ireland in my own constituency of Wicklow.

The Conference will have two key objectives: first to highlight ways in which citizens might be better informed about the European Union, and second to assess how we might promote greater engagement by all Europeans in deciding how our Union develops.

Given the broad nature of this challenge of Communicating Europe, I have decided to invite Ministers and State Secretaries from all existing, acceding and candidate states to the Conference. I have also asked representatives from the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council Secretariat to attend the Conference. Delegations from the Western Balkans will also attend. And I of course look forward to a representative of the Economic and Social Committee attending as well.

On the second day of the Conference I have asked a representative delegation from the Irish National Forum on Europe and representatives from European civil society organisations to attend. They will discuss with delegates how we might promote greater engagement by citizens in the EU. The Forum on

Europe, as you may know, was established by the Irish Government in 2001 to bring together a range of political and civil society bodies to debate Ireland's role in the enlarging EU and to discuss the Future of Europe. This discussion will be held in public session.

In addition to reviewing how the EU is communicated to citizens by Member State Governments, the European Commission, Parliament and the media, Ministers will also assess the openness and transparency of the EU. This will be done particularly in the context of the Convention on the Future of Europe, which brought together a range of actors meeting in public session marking a positive change in how the Union prepares Treaty change. We will examine mass communication and micro communication - the myriad of points of contact between the citizen and Europe. As communication is a two-way process we will also be looking at the means which have been established to receive the views of and to involve citizens in the affairs of the Union.

I am pleased to say that the response to partners to this initiative has been positive. The Dutch Presidency has agreed to carry forward the issue of Communicating Europe into the Dutch Presidency. I look forward to working closely with colleagues during the Irish Presidency and beyond to ensure that the EU better informs its citizens about how it operates, and that it seeks to engage all Europeans more directly in its decisions and in defining how it evolves.

Lisbon Strategy

I want to draw attention to another practical area where progress can be made towards bringing the Union closer to its citizens- the establishment of Reform Partnerships.

The Lisbon strategy, which commits the Union to a process of economic, social and environmental renewal by 2010, is one of the priorities of Ireland's EU Presidency.

Effective implementation of the wide-ranging reforms envisaged as part of the strategy requires the mobilisation not just of the Commission or national governments but also of employers, trades unions and other interested stakeholders. The support of employers is essential, for instance, if we are to create family-friendly and enabling environments that attract and retain female employees and older workers. Equally, we need the commitment of trades unions to facilitate the necessary adaptation to change that is increasingly essential in a competitive, global environment. The role of social partner organisations is especially important as they are best placed to assist in tackling fundamental Lisbon challenges. As the Commission put it in its recent communication on social dialogue, such stakeholders can assist in the positive management of change which can reconcile the flexibility essential to businesses with the security needed by employees.

We believe that participatory structures offer an effective means of generating the shared will necessary to drive forward the process of implementing often difficult, if necessary, reforms. To this end, Ireland has proposed to partners that the Spring European Council on 25 and 26 March call on Member States to build what are termed 'reform partnerships' to promote complementary strategies for change. We envisage such partnerships being formed of representatives of the social partners, civil society and the public authorities, in accordance with national arrangements and traditions. We have suggested that the strategies developed by such partnerships to promote change would be reflected in clear national policies and objectives. Governments would also

consult these partnerships in the course of preparing national contributions to the mid-term review of the Lisbon strategy, which is to be completed during Luxembourg's EU Presidency next year.

We have also sought to support participatory democracy on economic and social issues through the Tripartite Social Summit which takes place on the eve of the Spring European Council each year. The Summit gives a formal opportunity for the European social partners, represented by the employers' body, UNICE, and the trade union's Confederation, ETUC, to communicate the concerns of these key stakeholders to the Presidents of the Council and of the Commission.

We wish to use the channel offered by the Tripartite Social Summit to assist Council in developing targeted policy responses to enable the Lisbon targets be met by 2010. We have suggested in this context that this year's summit should focus on the theme of partnership for change. We would also hope that the work begun this year would be deepened by successive Presidencies, in co-operation with the Commission and the European social partners.

If used effectively, the Tripartite Social Summit and the proposed "reform partnerships" can provide a critical link between EU and national structures and thus help to overcome the problems that we have experienced in securing full implementation of Lisbon policies at national level. Similarly, these participative approaches should serve to promote the adaptation to change that is necessary to enable the EU to maintain its competitiveness in an ever more challenging global environment. Furthermore, the involvement of a wider range of relevant stakeholders can support a reform process that is informed by the expertise of environmental and social interests, the business sector and trade unions.

If successfully implemented, the Lisbon Strategy can comprise a hugely important and practical way of making the EU relevant to EU citizens. The challenge of responding to the concerns of citizens was addressed also by the European Convention and in the Draft Constitutional Treaty.

Constitutional Treaty /IGC

The Draft Treaty is set out in a lucid and readable way. It makes it clearer than ever who does what within the EU. It enhances the democratic role of European Parliament and involves the national parliaments in the work of the Union to a greater extent than ever before. It dramatically tidies up the system of legal instruments in the Union. It proposes a more streamlined decision-making system in the Council. It proposes for the first time a Charter of Human Rights to be inserted into the Basic Law of our Union. It restates the principles on which the Union is based.

The Constitution also contains a separate Title on the democratic life of the Union, a first in any EU Treaty.

This title makes clear the equality of citizens and that each shall be treated equally before the law. It seeks to ensure that citizens and representative associations are given the opportunity to make known and exchange their views on all areas of Union activity. It aims to ensure that the Institutions carry on a transparent dialogue with civil society and representative associations. It introduces a new "Citizens initiative" allowing citizens to invite the Commission to submit a proposal on issues of concern to them. The Council of Ministers will operate in public when considering or adopting a legislative

proposal. Citizens will have greater access to documents of the European Union Institutions.

All of these elements emerged from the Convention and have not been significantly questioned in the IGC. It is vitally important that we seek to ensure that the progress made is not lost.

The December European Council meeting in Brussels could not resolve all remaining issues in relation to the Draft Constitutional Treaty.

That Council meeting tasked the Irish presidency with the job of consulting the other Member States, assessing their position on the Draft Constitutional Treaty and reporting to the Spring Council in March on the possibility of progress on the new Draft Treaty.

Under the Taoiseach's personal leadership, the Irish Presidency has invested a huge amount of time and energy to this task.

The Presidency has done so because this is a task of extraordinary importance. We believe that if we do not make early progress the EU runs the risk of a further loss of momentum and of credibility. We understand too that, as time moves on, the task will not get any easier. A number of Member States are already facing into general elections. A new Commission takes office later in the year. In the second half of the year the Union has to deal with difficult issues, the future financial perspective being at the top of the list. If progress is not made, damage will be done to the Union. Confidence in the Union will erode. The job of agreeing the Treaty will get even harder.

For these and many more reasons, we will work hard to achieve a consensus. If early agreement is possible, we will actively pursue it.

Consultations to date have been positive. There are, however, still gaps. Where there is political willingness, a way will be found to bridge those gaps. We will leave no stone unturned. We are prepared to go the extra mile and to make the extra effort because the prize, a Constitutional Treaty which will prepare the Union for the years ahead, is a prize well worth the effort.

Final agreement will not, of course, depend solely on the Irish Presidency. If it did, the issue would already be resolved. Ultimately all 25 Member States must come to a common agreement. All 25 have a common responsibility to the Unions and its citizens.

Conclusion

Whether it be through the practical implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, the successful conclusion of the IGC or the better communication to citizens of what the Union is and what it does, we all have a great deal of work to do if we are to make the European Union more relevant to its citizens. I welcome today's Conference on participatory democracy as an important step in recognising the task ahead, and wish you well in you endeavours.

Thank you.