

"Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me, by way of introduction, to make a few preliminary comments.

You are certainly all aware that at next week's European Council, the negotiations on the relaunch of the Lisbon Strategy will set those in favour of doing more for the economy and employment against the supporters of greater social and environmental protection. I for my part think it would be perfectly feasible to maintain a balance here, even if this means redefining certain priorities. This does not necessarily mean that the environment and social cohesion will have to suffer. Such a view would be unduly limited

After all, promoting balanced socio-economic development means that competitiveness and well-being go hand-in-hand; it is clear that competitiveness by itself does not spontaneously create well-being.

The discussions on the EU's financial perspective are another part of this debate. It is important to define a strategy for the next five years, and it is also necessary to find the funds to put this strategy into practice. This debate will show whether the Member States really do intend to move forwards and release the funds needed here.

With regard to the subject of this conference, the debate seems to oppose those who think that education and information are absolutely vital and those who consider that it is much more important to stimulate consumer demand in new areas and to stress the need for the self-regulation of industry and the economy. In the field of energy alone, consumption could be made more efficient. It is universally agreed that current energy consumption levels are inadmissible.

Hence the keen interest in education and information. You will no doubt say that this is nothing new. After the 1973 oil crisis everybody was talking about saving energy, but have you heard much said since then? Have major programmes for saving energy been launched?

Walking through the building where we are meeting today with all its lighting, do you have the impression that sustainable development in the energy sector is on the agenda?

How then do we raise individual awareness with regard to products' environmental impact? How do we create the impetus needed for a redefinition of real needs?

It is crucial to relaunch information and education at that level. It is necessary to stimulate innovation and see it as a challenge. We need technologies, which can be profitable and environmentally friendly, thereby allowing us to change our lifestyles.

I hope that the work on research and innovation in the Lisbon Strategy, which is one of its key components, will be able to provide the bridge for bringing the economy and the environment together, in particular by seeing technological development as a means of improving the environment.

In this context, the question of the compatibility between competitiveness and sustainable development/consumption reminds me of the ongoing discussion on better lawmaking. That is to say, how do we improve lawmaking, and do so at all levels? How can MEPs and members of the Council decide on European legislation if they are unaware of its real impact on the different sectoral policies? Without wishing to exaggerate the importance of impact studies, I would say that they are one of the best ways of improving legislative action.

Thus, in my role as Energy Minister, Minister for Economic Affairs and the current President of the Competitiveness Council, I see this whole issue as a serious and captivating challenge, and I am eager to know what conclusions have been reached by your panels.

If your President will allow me, I would like to take the floor again after your conclusions have been presented, and try to take up the gauntlets that have been thrown down for me. Thank you.

(After presentation of the conclusions)

Thank you, Mr President. I don't regret having stayed in your midst. I found some of your conclusions interesting and I agree with them for the most part. I thought I would have been able to detect greater differences of opinion, but this is not the case. You have not put forward the theory that it would be easy and possible to manufacture a cheaper and better-quality product in an economy that is based on solidarity and keen to support sustainable development.

After the digital divide, a divide is now emerging in our countries with regard to sustainably-developed consumer goods. Not everybody can afford these products for the moment.

Nonetheless, consumers are attracted more and more to such products and are finding out about them. In addition, the major stores offer them alongside the massive range of traditional products on the shelves. This attracts consumers' attention and - fortunately - prompts them to modify their purchasing habits. However, these products are beyond the reach of many people.

Local shops are not able to meet the demand for such products. These shops exist alongside the big stores in many countries, and they could possibly become a niche for sustainably-developed products. I fear, however, that they might find it more and more difficult to survive if they go down that road.

Be this as it may, consumer trust is going to play a key role in redirecting consumption and hence production. It is necessary to make provision for transparent labelling which indicates the origin of products and offers adequate certification. However, this does not have sufficient support from the public authorities for the moment. The reputation of food safety legislation could be restored by this certification, which is a vital factor in restoring consumer trust and could even lead to a more responsible pattern of consumption.

The internalisation of the various forms of expenditure linked to production applies only in the case of renewable energies for the time being. A debate is taking place in most countries on the price to be paid for supporting the development of renewable energies. We have equipped ourselves with a strategy for achieving the Kyoto targets. This strategy encompasses alternative forms of energy and especially renewables. Nevertheless, nuclear energy also represents a danger. If countries engage in short-termism, nuclear energy could once again be accepted by societies more readily than at any time in the last decade. It is therefore important to be able to promote and even stimulate research into more advanced technologies in order to favour the renewable energies that will have a direct influence on CO2 accounting within the Kyoto framework.

Finally, the services directive, which is currently in the limelight, certainly contains provisions, which are not popular. The social dumping, which it could engender, is a disturbing factor. A common market in services will certainly enhance competitiveness and growth, but it will nonetheless have to be accompanied by harmonised rules for consumers. The consumer will certainly be discouraged by having to contend with different legislation in different Member States, even though one could imagine that in a larger common market he could find the services he wants.

Without wishing to conceal the problems that do exist, the Luxembourg presidency does not see any contradiction between the economic issues and consumer wants. This is why as part of our presidency and in my capacity as Minister for Economic Affairs, I am organising a conference on consumers at which sustainable development will also be discussed.

The study of sustainable development and consumption will not be able to reach any conclusions or achieve anything definite without pooling the creative efforts of all stakeholders, who will help provide the long-term perspective necessary for our idea of creating a culture of social responsibility.

Thus, I must congratulate the Economic and Social Committee for having chosen to study this topic, and I would encourage all conference participants to study the conclusions so that further projects can be gradually launched to provide the prolonged and sustained momentum required.

Those were a few of my thoughts in reply to what I have heard. Thank you, Mr President."