

*Inaugural speech by Anne-Marie Sigmund
on her election as President
of the European Economic and Social Committee*

Brussels, 27 October 2004

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Colleagues,

1. THANKS

First of all I would like to express my heartfelt thanks for the confidence you have shown in me by electing me to this post.

I am very much aware of the responsibility it carries.

1.1 Cooperation

I would like to work with you in a spirit of the utmost openness over the next two years.

In order to do so, I will need your continued trust and support, which will be my most important asset.

The vice-president designate of the Commission, Ms Wallström, recently spoke in another context of a *culture of cooperation*. I will do all I can to promote such a culture, and, starting now, my office door is open – both to you, the members of the Committee, and to every level of our secretariat, whose excellent work is ultimately down to individual people.

1.2 Continuity

What we have already achieved together gives me good reason to feel confident as I take over the presidency. I will be able to build on those achievements during my term of office.

I would therefore like the keynote of this forthcoming term of office to be continuity. The strategic approaches of my predecessors, from Beatrice Rangoni-Machiavelli and Göke Frerichs to Roger Briesch, have withstood the test of time.

I am sure that, together with Vice-Presidents Roger Briesch and Dimitrios Dimitriadis, I will find the right balance between continuity and innovation. I know that we can also rely on excellent cooperation with the secretariat, whose dependable support has always been a cornerstone of our work.

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I am fond of a quote from Neil Armstrong, the astronaut, who said that new ideas need wings to fly, but they also need a sturdy undercarriage to be able to land. In the same way, I believe that we need to keep our feet firmly on the ground, however much we want to innovate.

I will mention only a few of my priorities for the term of office that is now starting. This is because I would like to hold preliminary talks to discuss my ideas, in a spirit of team leadership, with the two vice-presidents, the Group presidents, the secretary-general and the relevant staff in order, among other things, to check the feasibility of my ideas.

I intend to present my detailed work programme in December, and I hope that we will also have time to discuss it.

2. INTERNAL AND INTERINSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS

2.1 Internal organisation of work

Let me begin by talking about our own organisation.

Integrating our 95 new colleagues has been just as successful as was the move to the new building in the heart of the European quarter.

We have highly-qualified, motivated staff.

In spite of this, I am convinced that our institution is not yet operating at its optimum efficiency.

If we improve transparency and communication, we will also improve decision-making and, not least, motivation.

In our consultative work, we must adhere yet more firmly to the principle of selectivity, in order to demonstrate our particular added value even more clearly than we have done up until now.

2.2 Relations with other institutions and strategic partners

Our cooperation with the other institutions is going through a period of significant change:

- the Europe of 15 has been enlarged to a Europe of 25
- we will be working together with a newly-elected Parliament and a newly-appointed Commission
- the Constitutional Treaty, which will be signed the day after tomorrow in Rome, has laid the foundations for a quantum leap in the legal basis for European action.

The EESC's role has already been strengthened by the Treaty of Nice, and the Constitutional Treaty extends it still further.

It is now up to us to use these opportunities and to confirm and strengthen our position as a useful and reliable partner.

I will therefore make a point of using the early days of my presidency for dialogue with senior representatives from the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament, and for a meeting with the president of the CoR. I will also make every effort to make personal contact, or renew and strengthen existing contacts, with the heads of the most important EU agencies and with key players in organised civil society.

If we quickly establish what we want from each other and what we can offer each other, targeted cooperation becomes possible.

I am particularly keen to strengthen cooperation with representatives of European civil society, and I will do everything I can to successfully continue the initiatives launched by Roger Briesch.

The same goes for dialogue with the European social partners. If we delimit the areas of interest more clearly, better cooperation might follow.

3. CHALLENGES FOR EUROPE

Some of the priorities for our work as a committee will be set for us from outside, as the new challenges facing the European Union will also be a factor in determining the Committee's agenda.

3.1 Constitution – civil dialogue

The draft Constitution and its provisions on participatory democracy and civil dialogue have given the Committee every opportunity to put its self-image as a bridge to civil society to the test. We now have a profile that will enable us to play a key role in promoting and structuring European civil dialogue. This key role – and I am particularly keen to emphasise this – should not mean that we claim a monopoly on civil dialogue in all its forms; it still leaves plenty of scope for other essential facets of this interactive public debate.

3.2 Communicating Europe

If organised civil society is to play a part in European matters, it must want to do so. However, almost the opposite seems to be true at the moment. The question is: Has President Delors' Citizens' Europe left the citizens behind? The level of participation in elections to the European Parliament would suggest that it has.

The Dutch presidency and the Commission have therefore quite rightly made the Communicating Europe initiative, launched under the Irish presidency, a priority.

We will doubtless have an important part to play in this communication strategy. In doing so we have an advantage over the other institutions in the form of direct access to civil society in the 25 Member States. With over 300 national organisations and wider networks, our members hold the key to this.

3.3 **Foreign policy**

However, there are also other challenges facing us.

New candidate countries are awaiting entry. The enlargement of the EU also means that we have new neighbours, who are expecting us to adopt clear positions.

The Commission was therefore justified in sending a clear signal by specifically mentioning neighbourhood policy in the portfolio of the Austrian commissioner, Ms Benita Ferrero-Waldner. In my initial preparatory contact with her, I told her about the Committee's desire to cooperate actively and received her agreement in principle to involve us in appropriate additional tasks.

In this context, it is self-evident that we will have to be more active in the Mediterranean region under Euromed. In all these initiatives, the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (AICESIS) will give us valuable cooperation.

The issue of the content and structure of European foreign and trade policy is also of concern to the Committee. The key words here are "global governance". Continuing our bilateral and multilateral cooperation policy will form the basis for putting this into practice.

We will also continue working to ensure that organised civil society is more closely involved in WTO processes.

4. **THE FUTURE OF EUROPE: PROPOSED KEY SUBJECTS**

Alongside these important issues that are thrust upon us from outside, I have every intention of setting the Committee some priorities of its own. The thread that runs through them all is the debate on the future of Europe. I firmly believe that the draft Constitution is not the end, but rather the beginning of that debate.

4.1 **Lisbon Strategy**

First and foremost I would like to mention the Lisbon Strategy. Giving a new impetus to pursuing and strengthening that strategy is also one of Commission President Barroso's aims. The Lisbon Strategy is very much a concrete vision for the future of European society. Therefore, this international shop window of European economic and social policy has an opportunity to build identity like almost no other European initiative.

However, if it is to work, the strategy must have the active support of the European people. However, the fact that its implementation is losing momentum is testimony of a lack of participation. The Committee can make a significant contribution to resolving this.

Indeed, the decision of the Lisbon Summit contains a call for this, which merely has yet to be implemented. In addition, we will today be adopting an opinion that contains proposals for improving the Lisbon Strategy and sets the direction for our future activities in this area.

4.2 **Sustainability**

The principle of sustainability, which is specified as a goal in the Constitutional Treaty, will increasingly influence the debate on the future. The European Union has made its commitment to sustainability and to sustainable development its international calling card. In this, it can be confident of the support of the European public – this is an area where an important criterion of European identity can be expanded and clarified.

This particular form of the solidarity principle simply means that we – as part of a contract between the generations, as it were – want to preserve today's world for tomorrow's world. Our Committee has considerable and respected expertise in this field, so we will certainly be able to make significant further contributions to this debate.

4.3 **Culture**

A priority that runs through all areas of our activity is culture. This area is, to some extent, an especially important *leitmotiv* of our activity.

As early as 1999, our Committee asserted that culture is the shared basis of civil society action, and thus forms the basis for defining shared values. If we consider culture to be a shared form of thinking and acting, culture is with us in our daily lives, just as it influenced our past and affects our future.

As well as preserving our shared heritage and art, culture includes education, training, sport, and recreation, and also science and research. Culture thus also provides the basis for any public discussion based on shared values. Culture as a process thus allows room both for diversity and for identity.

If we are serious about creating a European identity based, as Giscard d'Estaing has said, on unity in diversity, we must put the debate about culture on the widest possible basis. For this, too, the EESC is the best-placed institution. I promise that in this area, too, I will have firm proposals for action in December.

5. ORGANISED CIVIL SOCIETY: EXPERIENCING EUROPE

That completes the priorities I want to talk about today. Let me now return to the starting point: civil dialogue at European level, the role of organised civil society in European integration, and the vocation of our Committee to play a leading role.

The key issues in the debate on the future of Europe will be our shared European values and goals. These are the constituent parts of a common European culture, whose social dimension we should keep on emphasising. This culture must not remain the preserve of the elite: people need to change from being spectators to being participants, because only participation can engender a sense of being a stakeholder in society.

Organised civil society is key to all this. It is here that shared values are not only debated, but also lived out. This living culture has the potential to become a channel for the creation of a European consciousness, a European identity.

One of the key elements that brings European politics and civil society together is our Committee, in its role as a bridge between Europe and organised civil society.

6. SUMMARY

However, as I have already said to you, dear colleagues, I will set out a detailed work programme in the usual format in December, which will, as far as I can see standing here today, contain the following key elements:

1. Improving internal communication. Here I am thinking of creating a specific "open method of cooperation", which makes a firm commitment to transparency.
2. Further strengthening the Committee's position within the institutional framework. My goal is to conclude a cooperation agreement with the European Parliament, set out a formalised pragmatic strategy for cooperation with the Council, and optimise our relations with the CoR.
3. Formalising and further deepening our relations with representatives of organised civil society at Community level. Roger Briesch has already laid the foundations for this; we must build on what has already been achieved. This particularly applies to cooperation with the social partners.
4. Definitive clarification of the EESC's role in civil dialogue by creating appropriate working structures. Here, too, I am not starting from scratch. The activities that began as part of the Convention need to be continued.
5. Groundwork on the *Communicating Europe* initiative and cooperation with the appropriate cooperation partners at European, national and local level.
6. Carrying out specific tasks within our areas of competence in shaping the Union's foreign policy.
7. Priority action in key areas such as sustainability, European identity, etc., but also initiatives in areas that affect the Committee's concept of culture. In this area I am basing myself on the Commission's former Forward Studies Unit, which acted as a kind of internal think tank and gave the Commission significant food for thought.

The Europe we share is a success story: most of its achievements are now taken for granted to such an extent that they are no longer attributed to their source.

However, even if we solve the communication problem, an idea of Europe that looks only to the past cannot help to build a lasting European sense of identity. We therefore need a vision of Europe that looks to the future. Working at and for this Europe is worthwhile, and our committee, as a platform of organised civil society, has at its disposal all the prerequisites and the means to make a significant contribution.

Thank you for listening. I look forward to working with you.
