



rEUnaissance: Dare a sustainable Europe

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Speaker

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Madam Minister,

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here with you today at the ESEC, an institution with which the European Economic and Social Committee has a very close and special relationship.

Europe is ill. Two years ago, Pope Francis asked Europeans a question: “What has become of you, the Europe of humanism, the champion of human rights, of democracy and of freedom?” For the world – and Europe is no exception – is turning in on itself, resorting to narratives that are simplistic, lack nuance and sow division; nationalism is spreading, solidarity is on the wane; reason, humanism, and even science and progress are being called into question. Europe, its institutions and civil society appear to be a laughably inadequate defence against this sea of troubles.

We need to get a grip. The next, crucial stage is just around the corner: the European elections. We have to put forward a European project that galvanises people, one that even lets them dream. By way of example, let us take one of the issues that are currently the subject of hot debate in Brussels circles: the financial outlook for the period 2021-2027. This is obviously a fundamental issue, but it is also emblematic of our inability to develop visionary projects that would fill people with enthusiasm. It is no coincidence that I lit on the example of the budget: the EESC has just come up with a series of ambitious proposals on the subject, something I will return to in a moment.

At my inauguration as president of the EESC last spring, I launched a call for a rEUnaissance. The idea of a rEUnaissance stemmed from a realisation that led me to define four priorities:

First element of this realisation: the fourth industrial revolution has been in the making for twenty years and is more dramatic and at least as far-reaching as its predecessors. It literally exploded on the scene exactly ten years ago, in 2008, partly as a result of the economic crisis which was a catalyst for the unfolding economic, social and geopolitical disruption. The consequences are still coming to light, particularly the political ones: the rejection of the elite in favour of the common people; the rejection of moderates in favour of extremists, with their simplistic solutions for a complex world; the rejection of “experts” in favour of more or less ubiquitous obscurantism that is challenging knowledge, science and progress. 2008 was also the year in which the totemic smartphone made its first appearance (the speaker holds up his own). This pocket device gave people ready access to the internet and thereby abolished and merged the concepts of consumer and producer, ironed out the structures of all sorts of organisations, questioned the vertical distribution of power, spread information at the speed of light and exposed us to algorithms, GAFAs and a host of potential “big brothers”.

Second element: the environmental crisis is becoming an existential threat - although not for the planet because, contrary to what they keep telling us, the planet will keep turning. It will keep turning, however, with a new geological set-up in which humanity may no longer have a place. After all, 600 million years ago, the planet was just a ball of ice. No, the threat is to humanity, with our very existence possibly in peril. We Homo Sapiens have been here for more than 200 000 years; will we last as long as the Neanderthals, who survived for 400 000 years? On 8 October last year the IPCC report was made public: CO₂ levels have never been so high, and we are starting to forget the Paris Agreement objectives. We won't be able to say that we didn't know.

Third element: the social model, the labour market and the division of roles between the social actors, individuals and politicians are all being shaken up by the digital economy which is emerging against the backdrop of the environmental crisis. This societal storm will have political consequences: consequences within nations where “illiberalism” holds sway and democratic spaces are being whittled away; and consequences between nations, with international organisations being challenged and falling into disuse. The

UN is a “leftist point of reference” for the new Brazilian president, and the World Trade Organization is, for the president of the United States, “a threat to the sovereignty of the American people”. And yet each of these organisations, among others, is seeking only to appease and regulate the furor of the world.

My four priorities, in response to these major challenges, should be part of the debate aiming to re-enchant Europe, in the philosophical sense. Re-enchantment is a prerequisite in leading the fight for the May 2019 elections.

First priority: we must make a firm commitment to a sustainable Europe, underpinned by three inextricably interlinked pillars. The economy – the transitions under way may be perceived as threats, but they are also an opportunity for those who know how to ride the crest of the wave, bringing employers, workers and individuals together; batteries, electric cars and even renewable energy are the markets of tomorrow where European employers will have to enter the fray and compete with their third country counterparts. These are the arenas where the competitiveness of European industry will be acted out.

The environment – a punitive ecological approach, slapping on taxes and bans, must give way to one that nurtures publically-led initiatives, which are positive and mobilising. Then there is the social sphere, where no-one must be left behind: the transition to a sustainable Europe will bring social upheavals in its wake, and although there may be losers in the short term, they must be helped, since the upheavals will bring benefits in the long term.

Second priority: peace. At a time when the United States is challenging international nuclear arms treaties (the Iran agreement, the 1987 treaty on intermediate-range weapons), we must never cease to remind people of what constitutes the greatest success of the European project. This morning we broke a record: 73 years, six months and seven days since 8 May 1945, the longest ever period without war in Europe. And with every day that passes, we set a new record. We have to keep repeating this, as we are now celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the end of the First World War. Europe is the lid on the nationalist pot, where history has been bubbling away for more than 1 000 years.

Third priority: culture. The richness of our national histories and cultures (we are “united in diversity”, the motto of Europe) and the social model we have created, the ongoing search for compromise, something that is in our DNA: all this has set the stage, provided a framework allowing us to find solutions to the immense challenges before us.

Fourth priority: young people. It is for them that we must act. They are the ones who will be living in the world and in the environment in the second half of this century. Giving priority to young people means listening to them, for they are already the ones coming up with solutions. Recycling, the collaborative and sharing economies, concern for the environment: young people have already taken these issues to heart far more than their elders. Working for young people means moving towards hope, taking a step towards people who are often a source of solutions.

So let’s take a closer look at some of the European EESC’s main achievements and proposals:

The environmental transition: in its most recent opinions, the EESC has called on the Commission to be much bolder in its proposals regarding the EU budget. We need to work towards a budget representing 1.3% of European GDP (the Commission is proposing 1.14%), and to devote 40% of this budget to “greening” European funding (the Commission is proposing only 25% and the Parliament 30%). The EESC therefore aims to be in the forefront of moves to use the budget to tackle climate change and its impact.

The citizens’ consultations: when Ms Loiseau outlined the process of European consultations on the future of Europe to the EESC in March, we instantly decided to host the first stage of the process, a European citizen’s panel. So in May it was our pleasure to welcome 100 European citizens from 27 Member States to Brussels to consider this matter together.

The people who came clearly set out their priorities and expectations in terms of European policy: protection of the environment, education, training, a safer Europe, tackling inequality, protection of health, technology at the service of mankind, greater economic security and a more sustainable agricultural model. Through their questions and comments, they also stressed the importance of owning the European project and of being able to make long-term choices. What struck me most of all, however, over and above the specific issues, was people’s capacity to discuss them together in a constructive way where everyone listened to everyone else. In short, this was a lesson in engaged and mature citizenship for us as decision-makers. It is a very positive sign that the results of this consultation will be presented to the European Council in December, meaning that these contributions will be forwarded to the very highest level of the European Union. I am therefore delighted and, I have to confess, curious to be here to hear more about the outcome of the process in France. Moreover, the role played by the French ESEC, in cooperation with the regional ESCs, is fully in line with the spirit and approach adopted by the European EESC when it decided to lend its support to the consultations at European level.

The European Pillar of Social Rights: the EESC has taken the European Pillar of Social Rights very seriously and will continue to do so. In 2016 it organised national debates with civil society organisations in all the

Member States. The discussions were coordinated in cooperation with the European Commission and the national economic and social councils. They were attended by representatives from a broad range of employers' organisations, trade unions and other civil society organisations and, although to a lesser extent, the world of academia: 116 members of the EESC and nearly 1 800 representatives of civil society were involved. Civil society organisations participated in all the discussions. The European EESC also cooperated with a number of national ESCs (including the French ESEC) when preparing its first opinion on the pillar. The main conclusions and recommendations of the national debates fed into the first opinion on the pillar, an opinion which was followed by three others. Furthermore, work will most probably start at the beginning of 2019 on a European EESC own-initiative opinion evaluating the first measures implementing the pillar, including recommendations for the future.

I shall conclude this address by reiterating my wish to continue, and even deepen, the close cooperation between our two councils. And even if our two institutions work in different contexts, the one European and the other national, I want you to know that I am following very closely all the developments announced by Mr Macron with respect to the ESEC: it is my aim, within my remit, to draw inspiration from this and to introduce the necessary changes to ensure that civil society organisations are represented at European level.