

Introductory address

Conference of Speakers of the Parliaments of the European Union

Copenhagen, Folketinget, 30 June 2006

**“Interparliamentary cooperation and the future of Europe including an
exchange of information on the period of reflection and on the future of
Europe”**

[+/- 15 min]

Speakers, Presidents, Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen

First of all I would like to thank all of you, and especially Speaker Mejdahl, for inviting me here to speak. Last year I was invited by Mrs Szili to the Speakers Conference in Budapest. That was the first time a Commissioner addressed a Speakers Conference; a great honour and privilege – and a very useful and productive meeting. With this “second time in a row”, I hope we have established a long lasting tradition.

We want that, and we need that – the Commission and the national parliaments. Because it is an important and demanding journey we have embarked upon:

- we have to make EU policies understandable and relevant to citizens;
- we have to listen and to deliver;
- we have to use the right mechanisms;
- we have to make the EU Institutions accountable and reliable to those they serve.

For this to succeed, we need to be forward looking and creative. For it to happen, we need co-operation. This Commission has put the question of relations with the national parliaments firmly on the political agenda. You may remember the initiative from February last year, when I proposed a ten point programme for the Commission's relations with the national parliaments. Now we take those relations to the next level. “*The increased involvement of national parliaments can help make European policies more attuned to diverse circumstances and more effectively implemented*”, as we expressed it in our 10th of May decision.

As the first Vice President explicitly responsible for this important area, my ambition has been to sow the seed of a new approach towards the national parliaments. I believe we can now start harvesting.

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Today it is two weeks since the Heads of State and Government met in Brussels. Some have called it a marginal and uninteresting meeting. I don't agree. National parliaments and transparency saw tangible results.

We have now reached half time in the so called reflection period. Just like in many of the football matches in Germany these days, we have seen both good offensive and defensive play. I know some of you would have liked to see more yellow cards. Well, perhaps not in the matches in Germany...

And it is for the EU just as it is in any football match: when you have reached half time, you take a short break, and then you play for the whole second half. That is where we are right now.

The first half of this "EU match" has taught us a few valuable lessons. We promised to listen – and we did. Through the so called Plan D, 660 activities and meetings have taken place in the Member States. A special Eurobarometer poll. A highly successful discussion website with over 700.000 hits and 10.000 contributions so far in three months. Interesting enough, the patterns are the same, irrespective of the source of information we are using. Let me mention a few examples of what citizens have told us:

- 1) Achievements of EU are recognised. EU is associated with positive expectations.
- 2) The more people are pro-European the more they consider globalisation an opportunity. But Europe is still not yet seen as part of the solution for globalisation.
- 3) The recent and upcoming enlargement needs better explanation. Especially the prospect of Turkish membership is a concern for many. People feel that these decisions have been taken above their heads and not “in their names”.
- 4) The EU is associated with security in many areas – social security, security against terrorism and crime, security in health, living and environmental conditions, job security... “The EU can protect”. Europe is expected to bring solutions in terms of security in the widest sense of the word and peace democracy, living standards as well as research, innovation and economic performance.
- 5) Citizens want Europe strong. There is a feeling of solidarity and a need for common solutions.

This is what citizens want, and this is where the Commission will have to deliver. We need to score some goals in the second half to avoid a penalty shootout at the end. So now we move from a period of reflection to a period of engagement.

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Delivering concrete results and reconnecting with European citizens will create the favourable climate which is necessary for successful institutional reforms. And this is also the essence of what the Heads of State and Government concluded at the European Summit in Brussels two weeks ago. The so called twin track approach gives the necessary balance between the need to build a Europe of results, and the importance of securing an institutional settlement as soon as possible.

But the most concrete (and interesting) change for you, is perhaps the Commission's decision to "transmit directly all new proposals and consultation papers to the national parliaments, inviting them to react so as to improve the process of policy formulation". This is how we expressed it in our decision on the 10th of May, which was part of the Commission's contribution to the European Summit.

I must admit I was perhaps a little bit surprised over how positive and accommodating the European Summit was to this Commission initiative. They also asked the Commission to take your comments into account, to acknowledge receipt and that we should "offer a reasoned response within an acceptable timeframe".

This should apply to questions on subsidiarity and proportionality in particular. I leave it to you to deliberate on how much that "in particular" could be stretched (and in what direction...). But one thing is sure: since the proposed mechanism does not refer only to subsidiarity or proportionality, it can not possibly be argued that the Constitution has been anticipated. It is altogether based on the current Treaties.

And that is the only option available to us right now – to work with the current treaties. We cannot introduce new formal procedures. We cannot anticipate the Constitution. But there is a lot we can do.

In the past the Commission had what you could call a “strictly institutional attitude” towards the national parliaments. The basis was that the European Parliament was our main and often only interlocutor. Let me be clear: we have not started questioning the European institutional system. It remains based on the triangle with the European Parliament, Council and Commission. However, these principles should not stop us from looking further. And that is what we do with the national parliaments – we look further.

I am happy to be able today to present to you how the Commission will start transmitting documents to the national parliaments. You will also receive in the next few days a letter from President Barroso and me, where we explain the details.

The national parliaments will receive the same documents and metadata as the Commission sends to the European Parliament. All chambers should receive the texts on adoption, and when the own language version is ready. They could also select a procedural language for cases where the own language is unavailable. I can guarantee you that there will be a hard pressure to eliminate the delays in translation.

And when it comes to the Commission’s reactions: we could very well change a proposal in the light of comments from national parliaments. The Commission always retains the right to amend its proposals in the light of new information and new circumstances. → → →

But this should be seen as part and parcel of the ongoing process of continuously assessing initiatives, not as a separate exercise.

We are implementing this system now, as we speak. But, as always when technology is involved, nothing is really straightforward: you will not have heaps of extra mail in your offices on Monday – I'm sorry... But you will after the summer recess! And that goes for the IPEX database as well.

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Unfortunately I have no crystal ball to foretell the future, so I can only make assumptions. If base those assumptions on all that has happened only during the past year, I think next summer is going to be very sunny.

When we meet for the next EU Speakers Conference, I hope Speaker Mejdahl has been proven right for his report conclusions on co-operation with the Commission. And I hope we will have an interesting discussion on the new dynamic in European politics that the national parliaments gave through their comments on Commission proposals.

And I also hope that because of this, European affairs have finally started to get firmly anchored in the national parliaments and political parties, and in the national democratic traditions.

So the results we will have in a year's time will depend just as much on your national parliaments as on the Commission. We are mutually reinforcing.

I believe European affairs suffer from a “participatory deficit”. But citizens still have high expectations on delivery and policy content. This puts important demands on the EU Institutions, and on the Member States, and particularly on the national parliaments. We have to better involve citizens in the policy process at all levels, particularly young people and women.

We have to show that EU affairs are not foreign affairs. It is multinational domestic policy. EU questions are everyday questions. Let’s discuss them and debate them like that; in the parliaments, in the media, by the kitchen tables.

We need the whole of the European project to be more democratic, more transparent and more effective. This ambition goes far beyond any period of reflection. It goes far beyond any one individual Institution, be it national or European. It may take time – and it will surely require a close co-operation between the national parliaments and the Commission, and all other institutions and the Member States. Only in this way will we be able to take the EU into the future.

Thank you.