

## Opening Session

At nine o'clock on May 21, 1999, Mr. António Almeida Santos, Speaker of the Assembly of the Republic, Portugal, chairing the session, declared the conference open.

**Speaker Almeida Santos** (Portugal) greeted and welcomed all the participants. He referred to the growing importance of the Conference of Speakers as a forum for meeting others, for debating ideas and spending time together.

The Treaty of Amsterdam reflects the new understanding that it is no longer for the European Union to be conceived and constructed behind the backs of the national parliaments. These parliaments have an essential part to play in extending and deepening the Union, insofar as the parliaments are the sovereign bodies with the most legitimate claim to represent the citizens. The European Parliament should also play a more important role in advancing the European Union, in order to give meaning to the concept of European citizenship, possibly the promising organisational innovation in the Europe of the future.

A “revolt” is needed against the de facto situations created by bureaucrats. It has so far been possible, without any noticeable sense of shock, to share between partners an increasing proportion of the sovereignty of the nation states, the heirs of the eighteenth century, but there is no guarantee that it will be easy in future to overcome the actual nation state itself.

As the result of globalisation of the political process, the world may inevitably be transformed into a single world and the states into which the world is divided may inevitably be merged into a single super-state. This process could be as exciting as the utopian ideas on which it is based, but it will be all the more exiting to the extent to which we are able to control, politically and psychologically, the process of change which this will involve. On the other hand, if we let ourselves be taken by surprise by this new world, we will be condemned to social, political or even military upheavals of a type which we would like to believe belong only to the past.

The topics chosen for this conference, albeit the subject of exhaustive discussion, may perhaps run the risk of being too vast for a single meeting, but these questions are too pressing to be put off. The fact is that we can always return to them on a subsequent occasion. The process of globalisation has a clear effect on representative democracy and parliamentary institutions, and it is natural that this should attract our attention and give us cause for concern, for reasons which Speaker Trillo-Figueroa will eloquently describe.

The law, the act of government *par excellence*, has also entered a crisis in which its value is being undermined through widespread disobedience. Nothing more natural therefore than that those who make the laws should inquire as to the reasons for this and how to correct or avoid this situation. Our colleague Luciano Violante has been particularly aware of the need for us to look into this question, and I myself share his concern, expressed in lucid and constructive terms.

Parliaments operate an open-door policy – of all decision making bodies they are the most open to view. They are therefore subject to constant critical judgements from civil society filtered, when not actually induced, by the media. Deputy Speaker Haselhurst will alert us to this danger, challenging us to look deeply into the difficulties faced by Speakers in this area. As reducing the amount of information is not an option, might it not be best to increase the amount of information, including that actually disseminated by the parliaments themselves.

For these and other reasons, inter-parliamentary co-operation, as in fact encouraged by the Treaty of Amsterdam, is of vital importance to the health of parliamentary institutions. Bilateral co-operation, of course. But within Europe, also at European Union level. These meetings of ours are a good example of multilateral co-operation, but we are not condemned to be the only example of this. Hence the irrefutable need to include this topic in our agenda. We are all agreed that we need to further our co-operation. But with what aims and to what extent? How are we to organise this? What model should we adopt? These are the questions which we will be looking at on the basis of the excellent reports drawn up by Speaker Heinz Fischer and Speaker Birgitta Dahl. Thanks to your assembled wisdom, we will be able to tackle this question responsibly.

I would like to give a special word of thanks to those of our colleagues who have agreed to introduce the topics for debate. Not least because of the high standards to which we have all become accustomed.