

Speech by Romano Prodi (Strasbourg, 15 September 1999)


Caption: Speech by Romano Prodi, President-designate of the European Commission: Compromise Resolution on the 'Prodi Commission' (Strasbourg, 15 September 1999).

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Debates of the European Parliament

Sitting on Wednesday, 15 September 1999

Votes

Prodi, *President of the Commission*. — (IT)

[...]

Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, we are now at the decisive moment of what has been, in my opinion, a good exercise in democracy. I have been given many occasions to stand before you recently and present both my policy ideas and the key guiding issues of our future relations. You have questioned the Commissioners in writing and orally. We are pledged to transparency, efficiency and to accounting in an absolute and clear way for all our actions.

These principles of transparency, accountability and efficiency are echoed in the resolution you have just adopted. The centrepiece of your resolution is the commitments I gave to the Conference of Presidents last week. I am pleased to repeat my full commitment to these five points this morning on this formal occasion.

They represent the basis of a new start in relations between our two institutions, a new culture of openness and above all, mutual co-operation. A key element in those points concerns the question of the individual accountability of Commissioners. I have already repeated, clearly and honestly, my position on this matter. I believe that the recent observations we have made together will enable me to deal effectively with any problems which may arise. Let me be clear: our firm commitment to the principle of collegiality — which is the cornerstone of the Commission's role — will not become a shield for the individual accountability which all of us have to assume as politicians, before this House and before the European public.

I believe that these principles are essential for a strong Commission. Even if a strong Commission will sometimes disagree with you — we will often say no — I think that it is better for all of us to have a strong partner rather than a weak one.

Let me turn to the content of your Resolution. I am in full agreement that organising relations between us can only be one element of European construction. We have to engage the citizen, and this is a fundamental challenge for all the institutions. And one of my first major tasks is to present, in January, my policy guidelines for the five years of the Commission's mandate. Together we must give a high political profile to the consultation in January.

I repeat what I said in this House yesterday, that I have made a meaningful commitment to sustainable development, to responding to environmental concerns and I believe that the issue of quickly restoring consumer confidence in the safety of the food we eat and safeguarding our health is our first priority.

(Applause)

I recognise the fundamental importance of the preparation behind the forthcoming Intergovernmental Conference to the European Parliament. I reiterate the commitments I have made to you, for a strong and decisive Conference. I also want to be sure that there are no misunderstandings on the nature of the report I have commissioned from Mr De Haene, Mr von Weizsäcker and Lord Simon. This is not a Commission report and you will receive it at the same time as I do. In the light of the report we will receive, I understand the need to organise a discussion which will start in Parliament and move on to the Commission on the preparation of an effective Intergovernmental Conference for the Helsinki Summit. In view of this, the dialogue that has started between us is very important.

You have asked for an Interinstitutional Agreement as a framework for the Code of Conduct to govern our relations. I totally agree. We should now sit down and see how we can put our principles into practice. I also accept the commitments you have requested regarding the five points referred to in the preamble to your

resolution. They have of course to be worked out in detail in the future Code of Conduct. I would, however, remind you that as President of the Commission, I will exercise my responsibilities to the full. There are two points regarding your resolution which must be changed in some way. Firstly, you are asking for a Member of the Commission to be suspended from office where a serious charge is brought against him or her. I do not have the power to implement this. I have already said that should such charges be formally laid against a Member of the Commission, I would have to examine the implications of this very seriously. And I can imagine circumstances in which a Member of the Commission would want to take leave from office while awaiting judgement. I can even imagine circumstances in which resignation could be an issue. But this would have to be a matter of political judgement for the Member of the Commission concerned, and, ultimately, for me as President. But the rule of law has to prevail and we must respect the presumption of innocence. The fundamental freedoms apply to us all, but I assure you I would take firm action. Let me add a further comment on this. As far as the crucial element of accountability and responsibility is concerned, I will never accept that any Member of the Commission knowingly misleads, or lies to, Parliament. Our relations have to be founded on mutual trust.

Secondly, you want to give your views on the Codes of Conduct for Commissioners and for high-level appointments before they are implemented by the new Commission. As President, I have to say that I need these rules in place on day one of the new Commission. I do not want any ambiguity on the immediate commitment to the reform process that these codes signal inside the Commission. This does not mean, however, that they are set in stone. You have received these codes and I will listen attentively to your observations. These codes are not unchangeable.

Several of the points you wish to see included in the new Framework Agreement relate to transparency. I have told you that the new Commission will be open to your suggestions. It is committed to attendance at Committee or plenary part-sessions to deal with all important policy issues. It has also made strong commitments, within its sphere of competence, to see how we can improve the involvement of Parliament in all policy areas.

I recognise the importance you attach in particular to international agreements. You will nevertheless agree that our commitment to consultation has to be worked out in a way which will be consistent with the efficient conduct of negotiations. I can assure you that I will undertake to see this is done.

You also mention foreign and security policy and the Third Pillar. The Commission will work with you to see how we can best ensure that information reaches you quickly. I am ready to announce important Commission decisions directly to a plenary sitting when necessary and when you think it appropriate. We have to see how practical it is, for you as well as us, to organise this information on a weekly basis when Parliament is not in session.

The availability of documents is important to you. This is partly a question of transmission. It is also a question, as you say, of establishing firm rules where access may need to be restricted. I agree that we should make special arrangements for the transmission of sensitive documents regarding fraud to the Chairman of the Committee on Budgetary Control. I have to issue one caveat in relation to internal documents on fraud. Great care has been taken to establish an independent OLAF. I cannot therefore speak for their documents. I believe there will certainly be a need for transparency but we will have to ask OLAF, if not I would contradict the view I have of this body.

I can, however, confirm that it is essential, particularly in public administrations, that members of staff have a duty to report alleged fraud, impropriety or irregularity. It is equally essential that they can fulfil that duty through a coherent system which firmly guarantees their rights and the rights of those against whom accusations may be made.

The new, independent OLAF is duty-bound to resolve each case. I also agree that the duties of officials in this regard and their protection should be enshrined in proper regulations. Mr Kinnock has already given you a commitment in this regard.

I am very encouraged by the experience of working with you and the setting-up of the new Commission. I feel that we are working steadily towards a good political atmosphere of mutual understanding and to setting the foundations for a strong relationship. With goodwill on both sides, we will work together well and constructively.

I have prepared this reply in an attempt to really get into the operating contents that you asked for. I know that today's vote does not concern only these aspects of our work together, but also what we must do together for Europe. We have made commitments, and I can assure you that they go right to the heart of three important areas that concern both Parliament and the Commission. We have pledged to give Europe a new institutional order and prepare us for this Intergovernmental Conference which is of fundamental importance for our future. It is fundamentally important because we have been preparing for a second goal, a goal which in some way really will change our policies: the goal of enlargement. This means we will increase from 362 million citizens to almost half a billion by the time the process has finished. Enlargement will encompass countries with history, customs and income that are completely different. This choice has been made to guarantee the Pillars of Europe — peace and freedom. We cannot guarantee these Pillars unless enlargement occurs in a strong, open and constructive way.

Finally, we have made commitments on a third goal — to support the new economic upturn and put it to the service of the European citizens. This also means using it to boost employment, to improve social justice, to reform but also preserve the great cornerstones of the welfare system that Europe invented and which has suffered many reform problems over recent years but which must not be abandoned, leaving citizens unprotected. These are the three important tasks we have taken on together.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope that this vote will allow us to make progress in what — rhetoric aside — truly is a great historic task. It will be an overhaul of the institutions that the world has never before seen. Nevertheless, when we have to tackle together those tasks which are groundbreaking and mark a break with the past, we must proceed as the united Parliament and Executive which all modern democracies need. The future of this, our Europe, is grounded in our brilliant dialectic but also in our spirit of co-operation.