

Speech by Romano Prodi (Strasbourg, 14 September 1999)


Caption: Speech by Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission to the European Parliament, 14 September 1999.

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Speech by Romano Prodi, President-designate of the European Commission to the European Parliament, 14 September 1999

Madame President,

Honourable Members of Parliament,

The time for the vote has come.

I have explained to you why I believe this is the right team to lead the European Commission over the next five years.

You have scrutinised the team, both through their written responses to your questionnaires and through the hearings you have held with each Commissioner-designate. I should like to pay tribute today to the dignified and business-like way in which those hearings were conducted.

I hope your vote tomorrow will mark a new beginning in relations between our two institutions.

For it is now time for us to get down to work. Together we can and must put Europe at the service of the people. We have to win back ordinary people's confidence in Europe and in a European vision which puts their needs first.

I want our two institutions, and the Council, to work together, genuinely and efficiently serving the people of Europe.

I am determined to transform the Commission into a modern, efficient administration which has learnt the lessons of recent experience and put its house in order.

The reform process already under way within the Commission is just the beginning. In February 2000, Neil Kinnock will present a comprehensive Blueprint for Reform which will take careful account of the second Report of the Committee of Independent Experts. And of course we will consult and inform the European Parliament on progress in this field.

The Commission intends to become much more open. It is time for some glasnost here! I want to bring Europe out from behind closed doors and into the light of public scrutiny. I want people to be able to look over my shoulder and check that the Commission is dealing with the issues that most concern them.

I have started as I mean to go on. Wherever possible, the new Commission will aim to match the best European practice: for example, I am considering making a register of my correspondence available for public inspection in line with what is done in the most open countries in Europe. And the new Commission will be putting much more effort into communicating properly with the citizens of Europe, giving them open access to information.

Transparency is vital for the democratic health and accountability of the European Union.

I should now like to turn to what this new Commission will do, if endorsed.

In January, as agreed, the Commission will present the policy perspectives for the next five years, to be closely followed by the presentation of the 2000 work programme.

It is also essential that we hold a major overall political debate at the beginning of each year. I know you share my views on this. In future, therefore, I intend to present an Annual Political and Economic Report on the State of the Union. This report will consolidate material currently contained in a whole range of Commission reports, and this should provide a unifying element in the policy formulation process. It is my hope that together we will be able to organise the political discussion and consultation process much more

coherently than before.

Today, I would like to give you a broad overview of three fundamental challenges facing us:

Enlarging the EU and how this affects our relations with neighbouring countries;

Reforming the EU institutions and planning the next intergovernmental conference.

Securing economic growth, creating jobs and achieving sustainable development.

We have inherited an adventurous, visionary project, and as we plan the future, it is important to recall what we have already achieved.

We have created a customs union and a single market based on the free movement of goods, services, capital and people.

We have built an economic and monetary union with a single currency.

We have laid the foundations of a political union with shared institutions and a directly-elected European Parliament.

What we now need to build is a union of hearts and minds, underpinned by a strong shared sentiment of a common destiny — a sense of common European citizenship.

We come from different countries. We speak different languages. We have different historical and cultural traditions. And we must preserve them. But we are seeking a shared identity — a new European soul.

It was the vision of the founding fathers 50 years ago to create a European Community based on peace, stability and prosperity. And that European ideal is as relevant to our citizens now as it was then. As I stand before you today, peace, stability and prosperity are still our common goal.

That is why enlarging the EU is such a tremendous challenge.

Our attitude to enlargement is the mirror we must hold up to ourselves.

Can we rest content with having achieved peace, stability and prosperity only for ourselves, the 15 Member States? I think not.

The question therefore is: do we have the courage, the vision and the ambition to offer a genuine prospect of peace, stability and prosperity to an enlarged Union and, beyond, to the wider Europe? Terrible conflicts have divided our continent this century. We in the EU have put them behind us, and we must help our neighbours to walk the same path.

I do not pretend that the task is easy. It requires a comprehensive strategy setting out how, over the next 25 years, we are going to enlarge the European Union from 15 to 20 to 25 to 30 Member States.

This strategy must take account of three things:

First, the fact that, inevitably, enlargement will happen in stages: some countries will join before others.

Second, the specific needs of those countries who face a longer wait for membership.

Third, the way in which this process of enlargement affects our other neighbours, for whom membership itself is not an issue but with whom we want close and constructive relations.

With regard to the first point, I am very clear — we need a political vision, not a technocratic one. We need to set a genuine enlargement strategy looking beyond accession to our life together in the enlarged family of European nations.

This means, first of all, that we need to give serious consideration in Helsinki to setting a firm date for the accession of those countries which are best prepared, even if this means granting lengthy transition periods to deal with their social and economic problems.

There are also implications for the next intergovernmental conference, to which I will return in a moment.

And there is the fundamental question of how enlargement will affect our common policies. The more we enlarge, the harder it will be to say what really needs to be dealt with at European level. I do not pretend to have the answers on this, but we must have the courage to address the question seriously and honestly.

The second point is that we have to think creatively about meeting the needs of countries for whom membership is a more distant prospect. I am thinking of closer cooperation with those countries, perhaps granting them “virtual membership” in certain areas as a prelude to full membership. They could, for example, be offered the fullest possible participation in economic and monetary union, new forms of security cooperation adapted to their needs, and new forms of consultative and observer relationships with the European institutions.

The situation in the Balkans deserves special mention, because although the prospect of EU membership for those countries is not imminent, we must nonetheless use it to spur them towards peaceful co-existence and greater inter-regional partnership.

Let me be clear. The peoples of the Balkans have to resolve their conflict themselves before they can enter the European Union. They should not think they can import it into the EU so we can resolve it for them.

However, they certainly need our assistance, and I want to underline the European Commission’s special responsibility for the reconstruction effort. Our citizens expect the EU to take a moral lead, particularly in a region which is on our very doorstep. I do not want to disappoint them.

The third element of the strategy must be a clear and comprehensive approach towards our near neighbours whose contribution to the peace and stability of the wider Europe is vital.

Such a strategy will succeed only if it is inclusive. All of us — the European Union, the applicant countries, and our neighbours in the wider Europe — must work together towards our common destiny: a wider European area offering peace, stability and prosperity to all. A “new European order”.

This should include “Strategic Partnerships” with Russia and Ukraine, adapted to the geopolitical dimensions of these countries.

And it should include a “Partnership of Cultures” — the term I am tempted to suggest for a new and more ambitious commitment towards the Mediterranean, where we Europeans are dedicated to promoting a new, exemplary harmony between peoples of the three religions of Jerusalem. A resounding “No” to the clash of civilisations.

Finally, I must say a word about the importance of our strategic relationship with the United States. We need to build a reinforced transatlantic partnership capable of showing real joint leadership. Our first opportunity to do this will be the launch of an ambitious and comprehensive Millennium Round in Seattle offering a balance of benefits to all WTO members: let us seize this opportunity!

Let me now turn to the second immediate challenge facing us: the next intergovernmental conference (IGC).

We always knew that enlargement would raise the question of how the institutions function. But the recent

crisis in the Commission and the poor turnout in the 1999 European elections have shown that a genuinely ambitious reform of the European institutions is now imperative. And the Treaty of Amsterdam — positive on some issues — has fallen far short of what was required on directly institutional matters.

In my view, to proceed by stages, with a series of intergovernmental conferences, is particularly unappealing. It would plunge Europe into a state of perpetual constitutional reform. This would be incomprehensible to our citizens and our neighbours. And it would be a huge waste of energy much needed elsewhere.

So we cannot afford to settle for a minimal reform that fails to equip us for powerful, efficient, decision-making. As you know, I have asked Messrs. Dehaene, von Weizsäcker and Lord Simon, to prepare a report which the Commission will draw upon in forming its own position on the issues which the IGC must tackle. This report will be made available to you, and I look forward to a constructive debate in the run-up to Helsinki.

We have to express our views clearly and loudly, because the coming months will be crucial in determining whether we enter a new era strong and well equipped or weak and inward-looking.

But Europe isn't about institutions: it's about people. Prosperity in Europe depends on European people having jobs, and we need to get Europe back to work! Jobs depend on a healthy economy, so the third key challenge facing us is how to achieve environmentally and economically sustainable growth that creates new jobs.

After a difficult period, the European economy is now recovering. Growth is back, even if not yet uniformly spread. The sometimes painful process of convergence towards Economic and Monetary Union — combined with the responsible attitude of the two sides of industry towards wage increases — has created the macroeconomic conditions for healthy growth. The introduction of the euro has consolidated this achievement. The Member States' stability programmes will deepen it.

This is good news. But it also places upon us a huge responsibility. The economic upturn provides us with a golden opportunity to make structural adjustments at lower costs. Modernising Europe's economy today means more European jobs tomorrow. We cannot afford to miss this opportunity, as we have too often done in the past.

We must therefore use the more favourable years ahead to ensure that growth remains strong for as long as possible, that it generates the jobs we need, and that we combine it with a renewed and meaningful commitment to sustainable development. We must also tackle the long-term problems resulting from demographic trends and their impact on the fabric of our societies. Ultimately, this means increasing both productivity and the number of people actively participating in the labour force. If we can do this, we have a real opportunity to build an equitable and sustainable society for present and future generations.

The single market has given a new vitality to our economies and is contributing to the present recovery. But we must continue restructuring the single market and promoting liberalisation to bring even more competition in the goods and, especially, the services sector. This will help us to maximise the job-creating potential of growth and, in the longer term, will support a higher growth in our productive capacity.

This is not the place to list the structural reforms needed: they have already been outlined in many Commission reports. I would, however, like to mention one specific challenge facing us. Information technology is transforming the way in which we live and work and the way in which firms operate. It enables individuals and firms to do things unthinkable only a few years ago.

The current stunning performance of the American economy owes much to the gusto with which the United States has embraced information technology. I am concerned that European countries seem reluctant to fully exploit the potential of this technology. Modern economies are increasingly knowledge-based, and this is an area where we have a competitive advantage at world level. Encouraging the use and development of

information technologies will therefore be a priority for the new Commission. I propose to launch an initiative in this area for the Helsinki Summit.

Finally, we must take advantage of economic recovery and stronger growth to adapt our welfare systems to current demographic trends. We can no longer ignore the problems or postpone the decisions: the pensioners of 2050 are already among us!

A highly developed welfare system is one of the distinctive features of our European societies, and we must preserve it. However, we owe it to our children to adapt it so that it will offer them credible promises as close as possible to those that it held out to our generation. The Commission recently proposed an ambitious strategy for further EU cooperation in this area, and this is something to which I will be attaching particular importance.

In all these difficult tasks, the European Union has a crucial role to play. First, because it is more effective to address long-term issues through concerted European strategies — such as the European employment process — than at purely national level. Second, because action at European level often makes it easier to avoid the more immediate pressures of the national electoral cycle.

We have the tools to do the job. For example, following the Luxembourg Summit, solid progress has been made in building a genuine European employment strategy in which the combination of guidelines, peer review and recommendations is providing a powerful European stimulus to change.

We have to continue driving this process forward, deepening cooperation at European level so as to focus people's minds on the major structural reforms needed to revitalise our economies.

Madame President,

Honourable Members of Parliament,

You are democratically elected representatives of the European citizens.

You represent the different European political families in all their diversity.

I hope that in your vote tomorrow you will give the new Commission your strong support.

For my part, I stand by the political commitments I gave to the Conference of Presidents last week, which now have to be integrated into a new framework agreement that will govern our future work.

Let us therefore turn the page.

Let us foster a new spirit of cooperation between our institutions.

A new balance, based on mutual respect.

A new partnership, working for the people of Europe.

A new Commission. A new European Parliament. A new start.