

Address given by Hans van den Broek (Luxembourg, 17 February 1986)

Caption: On 17 February 1986, Hans van den Broek, President of the Conference of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States of the European Communities, welcomes the signing of the Single European Act (SEA).

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Speech made by Mr H. van den BROEK, President of the Conference of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States of the European Communities, on the occasion of the signing of the Single European Act in Luxembourg on 17 February 1986

The time has come to complete the process initiated at the European Council in Milan and which, after a period of thorough consideration and intensive work, has culminated in the result which we have agreed to call the Single European Act.

My feelings at this juncture, as President of the Council, are mixed. They are characterized by a certain solemnity because this is an important moment in the history of the Community; by an unmistakable sense of satisfaction because a major, complicated venture is being successfully concluded; and by an equally unmistakable sadness because the list of signatories is not as complete as we had hoped. However, before saying anything further about these various aspects, I wish once again to pay tribute to the Luxembourg Presidency. It is this Presidency which carried the burden of this venture and which throughout the second half of 1985 gave uninterrupted, determined and intelligent guidance to the discussions, thus enabling the Heads of State and Government to conclude an agreement of principle in Luxembourg on 2 and 3 December 1985.

Our great admiration for the efforts undertaken during that period by the Luxembourg Presidency and here I am thinking in particular of Mr SANTER, Mr POOS and Mr DONDELINGER has made us decide to sign the Single European Act here in Luxembourg, at the very same venue where the Heads of State and Government reached agreement, albeit with reservations of which we are still feeling the impact.

I should now like to say a few words about the Single Act we are about to sign. Much has already been written and said about it, so I shall not dwell too long on the subject.

The Single Act has been the subject of many comments which have in my opinion been grossly exaggerated in both directions.

If asked to make an objective judgment, I believe we would all agree, now that we have been able to stand back and reflect more calmly on the whole matter, that, despite its unavoidable shortcomings, the Single Act definitely represents progress and a step in the right direction.

It is difficult to quantify the exact extent of this progress; however, I am confident that in practice it will prove greater than we believe it to be at present.

I do not intend to discuss in detail a text the strong and weak points of which you know as well as I do.

I would merely wish to highlight its two outstanding merits which would, in themselves, warrant a positive judgment.

Firstly, the Single European Act is about, and attempts to give an answer to, some of the key questions facing Europe at present which will be decisive for its future, and therefore also for ours.

The main objective is the early achievement of a genuine, completely free market which will finally make the European dimension a reality for the citizen and constitute a factor of economic dynamism and prosperity in all the Member States. In order to achieve this, the Community's decision making power had to be strengthened, and this we have managed to do by extending qualified majority voting. Simultaneously, the requisite solidarity between the Member States and the instruments available to the Community in this connection namely the Structural Funds have been given their rightful place in the Treaty.

A further challenge facing Europe at present has to do with democracy. It has also been possible to take account of this aspect in the Single Act, at least in part, by involving the directly elected Parliament more closely in legislation and giving it a further possibility of influencing the content of decisions.

The third challenge is in the area of science and technology, which everybody regards as crucial for the future. Here, too, the Single Act has something new to offer, namely a legal framework which will provide a platform for the Community's future activities. The same is true for the protection of the environment.

The Single Act thus provides an answer, or the beginnings of an answer, to present needs and aspirations.

To my mind, a second merit of the Single Act is the fact that it has managed to balance conflicting or contrasting demands and aspirations, thus safeguarding the future.

Contrary to the superficial view sometimes held, the European debate is not a simple matter and cannot be reduced to the dualism which some would like to see in it. The Member States may well start from a common premise, but they have different feelings, interests and aspirations as regards the building of Europe. To wish to deny this out of hand would be tantamount to condemning the whole venture to failure. Being European means also to accept Europe in all its diversity and contrasts. The absence of some from this afternoon's ceremony is an example of that.

All this makes the whole undertaking no easier and we were certainly aware of this.

It is the merit of the Single Act that in it the always precarious balance between the possible and the desirable has been struck, and in a fairly short period of time clear proof of how convinced we all were that the time had come to act.

The Single Act has opened up avenues which we must now strike out on with determination. It is first and foremost an instrument in the service of a political will which, I am convinced, will not falter at the critical moment.

We know from experience that the best and even the most ambitious texts can remain a dead letter when the political will is lacking. When that will is actually present, texts which appear to be modest in scope or open to question can prepare the way for decisive progress.

We have demonstrated the will to draw up and adopt the Single European Act; now we must all be prepared to make the best possible use of it. Its real significance lies in our hands.

As President in Office of the Conference I hereby open the European Act for signing.

In so doing, I am fully aware that not all Governments are prepared or in a position to set their seal of approval to this document today.

I would point out and I now speak on behalf of those delegations which do wish to sign that our purpose in signing the Single Act today is to demonstrate our firm political will to carry out this reform of the Community swiftly.

We are not doing so in order to put pressure on anyone each Member State is completely free to take its own decisions but to give expression to our conviction that implementation of the results of the Conference is a necessity for the European Community. With the Act, prospects of progress are opened up. Without the Act, regression and disintegration threaten us.

We hope, then, most sincerely, that the Act will shortly be signed by all Member States. The political significance which is being conferred on it today will then be complemented by the legal force which today it still lacks.