

Statement by Emilio Colombo to the European Parliament (19 November 1981)

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Madam President, esteemed . . . colleagues,

(Laughter and applause)

... on behalf of the government of Italy, I should like to thank the European Parliament and its President for giving me this opportunity to elucidate the motives behind and the objectives of the joint Italian-German initiative to relaunch the European Union.

More than ever today, we believe that, in a world haunted by fears and racked with tremendous crises, it is vital for Europe to be keenly aware of its shared interests and of the importance of its tasks. We must fulfil the many demands expressed by our different populations and we need to enhance the Community's specific role in the world at large.

Aside from the urgent economic and monetary problems which the Ten must solve, we are also faced with more general and far-reaching problems. Europe must adopt its own attitude, to these, equip itself with its own strategy and in the process it will become more and more of a political entity. The more we pursue this path, the more the boundaries between the economic and the political aspects of building Europe will be eroded.

The talks and negotiations which have started within the Community institutions are not enough to overcome our present problems as quickly as we need to. We must take steps to strengthen the political will of Europe. The need to speed up the construction of Europe with tangible results is all the more pressing, since the problems are not just ones which are occurring inside the Community, but also call for a united response to what is happening outside.

We must understand the connections between all the problems which are now under discussion. This is the necessary premise for the relaunching of the European ideal, which no longer eludes our grasp. The proposals and initiatives which have emanated from the European Parliament, the centre of our cultural, political and democratic forces, where the views of our different European governments make themselves heard, have certainly been giving very encouraging signs of vitality throughout this year. We hope that this growing awareness will lead to a powerful political revival, an emblem of Europe's common vision.

The drawing up of a 'European Act' and of a 'Statement on economic integration issues' which the Italian and German governments have recently brought to the attention of Member States and Community institutions [in preparation for the] European Council at the end of November, represents a contribution to, and a plea for, a new phase of dynamism in the building of Europe. We are calling for a revival of European integration, we want the institutions strengthened and the decision-making process improved and we want to encourage and extend to a greater degree the pragmatic process whereby political cooperation is achieved among our ten countries. In this way, cooperation will become more widespread on matters ranging from security to culture and law, which will bring us closer to the basic aims of a European Union. We will achieve this by adopting a flexible approach and through the mutual support of political, economic and social aspects in turn, and as we gradually progress, it will be possible to set ourselves, and meet, new targets.

The European Parliament's part in this whole scheme stems from its importance as a body elected by the people. It is our firm belief that Parliament has not only the title but also the authority to play a central role in spurring on the creation of the Union. When drafting our proposal, ideas from the Parliament were foremost in our minds, as can be seen from the number of proposed measures in the draft European Act calling for increased participation by the European Parliament in our joint task of creating the Union through both economic integration and political cooperation.

At the meeting held the day before yesterday in Strasbourg, Madam President, you rightly made the most of your opportunity to emphasize the European Parliament's expectations and hopes for more fruitful

discussions with the Council and its general desire for closer participation in the decision-making process of the Community. Parliament expressed its wishes most recently in its July session and I believe that our draft European Act goes some way towards meeting them.

The conciliation procedure, prefiguring the joint taking of decisions with the Council, is to be extended to improve the uses made of it. A whole series of measures is foreseen to strengthen the European Parliament's watchdog role. These include the recognition of Parliament's competency to debate all topics relating to the European Community and to political cooperation, a strengthening of its right to ask questions and to make recommendations, an assurance that replies will be provided to Parliament's resolutions and that, through the Political Affairs Committee, relevant information on the international political issues dealt with by the Council will be promptly supplied. Further proposals include the participation by the President of the European Council in the debate on the progress made during the year towards European Union, the submission by the Council of a six-monthly report, consultation with the President of Parliament before the President of the Commission is appointed, and the introduction of a debate on the Commission's nomination and programme.

(Applause from various quarters)

It has even been decided to expand Parliament's advisory role to include decisions on Community enlargement and on the conclusion of international treaties.

It is hoped to develop contacts and the reciprocal giving of advice between the European Parliament and the national parliaments in order to promote greater awareness in the European public of topics connected with the unification of Europe.

With the prospect of a European Union before us, we shall reaffirm the prime importance of the European Parliament, which must be reflected in its rights to participate in Community decision-making and in its watchdog functions. It is hoped that the Parliament will work with us on the process for the eventual revision of the 'European Act' and that it will be associated with preparing a draft treaty on European Union.

The strengthening of the institutions — a move we consider urgent and vital, if the political trend we wish to promote with our initiative is not to founder — will consist not only of better coordination between the institutions, but also their inclusion in the gradual attainment of political cooperation. These measures are aimed at restoring to the decision-making process its Community character, especially where the Council's decisions are concerned, and they are also aimed at increasing the European Community's capacity to act. Taken as a whole, the new ideas introduced by the Council have as their target a reduction in the intergovernmental strategy in the short-term and the setting in motion of a gradual, more Community-oriented process, with appropriate reference being made to the voting procedures laid down in the Treaties of Paris and Rome.

(Applause from various quarters)

By the same token, we feel it is essential to facilitate the decision-making process where political cooperation is concerned.

Madam President, I have tried to give a brief outline of the ways in which we hope to improve our relationship with the European Parliament. We will not be offended if our suggestions do not seem to you to go far enough. We would however be disappointed if you thought they were too ambitious. We have indeed tried to be forward-looking and realistic at the same time — I must be honest with the Members of this Parliament — precisely because this dual approach was necessitated by the overall stage of development that the Community has reached, and by the problems which persist, according to public opinion in some countries, with regard to the desire for more short-term integration. This is where the European Parliament really can and ought to play its highly crucial part in boosting the idea of a European Union, by making people aware of the gravity of our common problems and the consequent need to increase the decision-making power of the Community and the role of the Community institutions.

We are proposing a cautiously gradual and realistic approach because it is only in this way, given the current stage of development, that our objective will retain its meaning and not become the source of disagreements and wrangling over European unity. Yet we do of course reaffirm our final objective loudly and clearly as can be seen from the eventual revision clause in the Italo-German draft, which is one of the political keypoints.

(Applause from various quarters)

In other words, it is our belief that it is vital to revive right now the idea of a European vision which moves with the times and to propose specific schemes which appear to us to be immediately possible to implement, given their content and the state of the institutions, provided that the common political will to implement them exists. What is more, we in the Council are moved by the spirit of convergence, and not by that of competition, where other suggestions geared to speeding up the process towards European Union are concerned. We hope that efforts in this direction will continue unbroken, that they will have such an impact that the need for European political integration will never be cast aside and, better still, that such integration will act as a catalyst in overcoming the Community's pressing problems, problems which undermine its spirit and reduce its influence in the world.

In our opinion, the proposed measures can be seen as a package of political and institutional reforms capable of boosting political integration without either element having the upper hand. In other words, the political and institutional aspects will complement and strengthen each other and bring us closer to our major goal, the unity of Europe. Of course, at the basis of all this there must be a common political will to deal with the broad issues of economic integration, particularly with regard to those policies which have not proved entirely satisfactory, and the Ten must commit themselves to abiding by a policy of ever-increasing solidarity. The document entitled 'Statement on economic integration issues' is to be seen as a solemn pledge to reaffirm these commitments and to follow this path.

We must make ever greater efforts — although it has to be done, of course, step by step — to achieve economic and monetary union which will be a decisive factor in strengthening ties between our various countries. Indeed, it must be obvious to everyone that you cannot even talk about economic and monetary union unless there is a corresponding increase in the feeling of Community solidarity. This must exist before it is possible to promote the convergence of our various economic policies and the correction of territorial, economic and social imbalances which continue to exist within the Community. Above all, we must prevent the process of integration from having the paradoxical result of exacerbating those very imbalances which we wish to overcome, simply because of the way it is being carried out. We must identify a means of correcting the situation in such a way that we can, in a balanced manner, meet the targets which correspond to a common will for progress within the whole dynamic of the integration process.

To this end, we think it would be useful to establish parameters which are objectively binding for common economic policies. If we have one uniform framework of reference for relations between the Community Member States, we will succeed in fostering a spirit of convergence and in demonstrating a mutual interdependency in our pursuit of Community aims. Of course, there is no question of our churning out a list of priorities which have nothing to do with the realities of Community life — which is something which is always changing and developing — but, on the contrary, of our pinning down the main points of common interest with a view to increasing solidarity and improving the quality of life of our various populations.

I would say, Madam President, that all of the reasons which led us to follow the path of European unification have to be considered as rooted in a historical context which in fact bears out their validity. The enormous tasks which await us are the result of the success of our activities up to now and the strength which we may derive from them. An awareness of our own strength or power should give us pause for thought. It should encourage us to initiate a general European revival which is in tune with our increased responsibilities but which at the same time allows us to appreciate the wider vistas opening up in front of us.

Europe represents a precious and irreplaceable force for balance, progress and peace on the international

scene; it can and must continue to be so. Europe's balancing influence in world affairs is the result of its historical values and its culture, its economic importance and its desire for peace. This ideal should guide us when we tackle the responsibilities which we are called on to assume in world affairs. It should convince us that we need to overcome the tendency to look after our own national interests and spur us on to affirm our common identity in our relations with the outside world. But in order to assume such an identity, we need to be more closely united amongst ourselves and for this reason we must make greater efforts to build Europe on firm and deep foundations.

There are many issues of worldwide importance, such as the safeguarding of peace, international collaboration and the defence of basic human rights. There are highly topical ones such as arms limitation, disarmament, more effective participation in solving the problems of hunger and development. All these problems are felt keenly — and quite rightly — by young people in our countries. Other topics which concern us include a more balanced share of responsibilities within the Atlantic Alliance, to which a number of our countries belong, and hence within the whole western defence system which is of interest to us all. As Mr Genscher has already pointed out, President Reagan's statements made yesterday clearly show that when Europe expresses itself as one voice, even within the Alliance, its opinions are welcomed as a common view shared by Europeans as a whole.

(Applause from the centre and the right)

There is another aim which we must keep clearly in our sights, and that is the maintenance of conditions which will enable us to dialogue usefully with the countries of the East on questions of security and intercontinental cooperation, based on a commitment to keep alive a cultural identity which goes beyond present historical circumstances. These talks call for concentrated efforts, and hence greater unity among ourselves.

We must show that we are realistic and sensible as we pursue our aims, but we must also give evidence of enthusiasm and vision — elements which are essential for all important undertakings, but which, unfortunately, sometimes seem to fade in face of difficulties. We will have to find answers to the questions of our fellow citizens and electors who are not only harassed by the problems of daily living but also anxious about the future, as nowadays everything seems so uncertain. We must show that we are attentive to the needs of disaffected young people who are unhappy at the erosion of ideals and the blatant contradictions in our society, even if they have not expressed their views very coherently.

Europe must learn to respond to the many serious economic and social problems which confront a society moving towards new phases of technological and cultural development, events which do not represent a simplification of its way of life but which determine new responsibilities. Our people are fortunate in that they can fall back on a huge legacy of experience and thought which have been produced over many generations. This heritage is our civilization, a civilization which is not exclusive, which is capable of welcoming useful additions from without, a pluralistic and tolerant civilization in which everyone feels he can participate.

Among other things, this traditional outlook has made possible — and fruitful — collaboration and the exchange of ideas between political and idealistic groups of different persuasions who can nevertheless meet each other half-way in a spirit of openness and tolerance. This Parliament too benefits from our great common European culture, as it permits lively but nevertheless respectful dialogue between people holding different views.

There is one conviction which, I believe, we all share, no matter what our country of origin is, or what political party we belong to. It is up to Europe to offer to the world as an example the spiritual values on which its thousand-year culture is based. We all recognize ourselves in those values and in the various ideals which we mutually respect. For me, and for many others, I think, these are Christian values, values which Christianity brought to life and made universal. If Europeans adhere to them, they will permit us to conceive of a model for society which will allow men to live at peace with themselves and in harmony with their natural and working environment, and which will help them to regain faith in the progress of society.

(Loud applause)