

'Commission President Prodi and Belgian Minister Neyts guests at November plenary session' from CES-Info

Caption: On 28 November 2001, in speeches to the plenary session of the Economic and Social Committee, the President of the European Commission and the Belgian Deputy Foreign Minister referred to the institutional role of the Committee and to its responsibilities.

Source: CES-Info. Monthly publication by the European Economic and Social Committee. ; Editor FOSTER, Nick. December 2001, n° 9. Brussels: Press Service of the European Economic and Social Committee.

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Publication date: 16/09/2012

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Commission President Prodi began his speech on 28 November by remarking that EU citizens were losing confidence in the Union's institutions and that "we must put an end to this". In this connection, promoting new forms of governance was a vital priority for the Commission. **Mr Prodi congratulated the ESC on its work on stepping up contacts both with civil society organisations in the EU not directly represented on the Committee, and with civil society organisations in the candidate countries.**

Referring to the Commission's White Paper on European Governance, Mr Prodi told Committee members that he placed "high hopes in ESC exploratory opinions" that would involve the Committee earlier in the consultative process. "We need to preserve democratic accountability, but we must also allow for participatory democracy," commented Mr Prodi.

There was a need for the EU to clarify its common objectives and for each institution to concentrate on its core activities. The Nice Treaty reflected the increasing recognition of the role of the ESC. Referring in particular to the situation post-Laeken, the Commission president noted that the Committee was an **"essential intermediary between vital forces in our society ... your job is to encourage and synthesise debate"**.

For her part, **Mrs Annemie Neyts**, Deputy Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs, informed ESC members of the state of preparations for the Laeken Summit. She noted that "just about everybody" had accepted the principle of a convention which would operate for 12-15 months to prepare the next intergovernmental conference. **The ESC would, the minister said, participate in the convention as a permanent observer.** Thanking Mrs Neyts for her participation, ESC president **Göke Frerichs** reminded her that the Committee was the only EU institution able to represent the Union's economic and social interests. Referring to those groups not currently represented on the ESC he said: "our door is open".