

Speech by Felipe González to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 31 January 1984)

Source: Council of Europe - Parliamentary Assembly. Official Report. Thirty-fourth ordinary session. 30th January - 2nd February 1984. Volume III. Sittings 22 to 27. 1984. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. "Speech by Felipe Gonzalez", p. 659-665.

Copyright: (c) Council of Europe

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/speech_by_felipe_gonzalez_to_the_parliamentary_assembly_of_the_council_of_europe_strasbourg_31_january_1984-en-9893bd7f-ed78-4f49-9755-6c375c9631fe.html

Last updated: 19/02/2014

Speech by Felipe Gonzalez at the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 31 January 1984)

Mr President, distinguished members of the Parliamentary Assembly, first of all, I should like to thank this Assembly for the opportunity you have given me to speak to you in my capacity as Head of the Spanish Government. It gives me great honour and satisfaction to address the oldest of all European institutions, which represents twenty-one countries and nearly 400 million citizens and which has worked so hard on behalf of ever-closer unity among the European peoples.

Allow me now to remind you for a moment of how moved I felt when I spoke to you on 11 October 1977, from this very same tribune, accompanied by other representatives of the Spanish people that had been elected in the first elections to take place in Spain after a forty-year absence of freedom. At that time, your Assembly generously listened to us and had the vision to recommend Spain's immediate accession to the Council of Europe, thereby demonstrating your confidence in our democratic profession of faith.

If the Council of Europe had confidence in Spain and its representatives at that time, we for our part never lost confidence in the role played by the Council in the building of Europe and in its contribution to Spain's full integration into the European family of nations.

In this connection, I should like to remind you that I am merely following the precedent laid down when you welcomed the King of Spain some time ago, and, slightly earlier, the first President of the government of the new democracy.

During the six years that have elapsed since our entry, many things have happened in Spain, in Europe and in the world. Insofar as Spain is concerned, the people have, through the Constitution and the laws enacted under it, laid the foundations of peaceful coexistence in freedom; with the amnesty, we have relegated to the past many things that we wished to forget; and with the statutes of autonomy we have started out along the path of a new type of state organisation more attuned to the aspirations of the peoples who are part of it.

Finally, the Spanish people, by voting for change a year ago, with full responsibility and in freedom, made possible the orderly alternation of political factions, which constitutes the best example of the strength and vitality of our political system. In this way, a new phase of the democratic process in Spain has begun, with new expectations and new hopes.

In this new phase of Spain's political process, the present government have as basic goal compliance with the clearly expressed wishes of the Spanish people. We have committed ourselves to the daily task of consolidating the democratic way of life, as well as to promoting the modernisation of society, that is so greatly desired by the people. Prudently but firmly, the government that I head is carrying out this policy, feeling that it is backed by the majority of the Spanish people and also encouraged by a widespread desire for change and improvement, that goes well beyond the bounds of its own electorate.

Our resolute will to become a member of Europe constitutes part of this historic project of the modernisation of Spain. In this, we are merely reaffirming and updating our European identity, that is perfectly compatible with Spain's Mediterranean and Latin American spheres of interest. Sometimes we feel that our trust in Europe's destiny is greater than that of other countries which are already members of the European institutions.

Just over six years ago, on regaining democracy, Spain submitted its application to the Council of Europe and the European Communities. With your help, becoming a member of the Council of Europe was a matter of months. Accession to the European Communities is, as we all know, a much more complicated matter. We have been negotiating since 1979. As far as the Spanish Government is concerned, we are as determined as on the first day, but we cannot hide the fact that there is not the same enthusiasm among the Spanish people as six years ago. We shall continue to work as earnestly as before in order to overcome the obstacles that are still in the way of our entry into the Communities. I am confident that the year 1984 will be decisive in this undertaking, and that accession may take place on 1 January 1986.

We are aware that, to the intrinsic difficulties involved in a process of this type, is now added the seriousness of the crisis that we are now experiencing. It is a European crisis, a world crisis, an economic crisis, but also a crisis, or a loss, of confidence. We should not underestimate the tensions and the conflicts that now surround us. In today's world, men struggle not only in order to shape the future; they are struggling to ensure that there will in fact be a future.

In the midst of this crisis in our civilisation, Europe is simply struggling to be itself, and to have something to say in world affairs. As President Sandro Pertini so aptly said here: "From being an ideal, Europe has now become an imperious need."

Mr President, distinguished members of the Parliamentary Assembly, Europe exists; the problem is how to achieve European unity. On this path, along which we are still groping, the European institutions play a leading role in a pluralistic and dynamic process. I am convinced that it would be useless to enter into pointless arguments about the respective competences of the Council of Europe and the European Communities. The important thing is that both institutions should work together in a close relationship, that functions properly, in which they complement each other and, above all, in which they have as their common goal the well-being of Europeans and the affirmation of Europe's identity.

Within this framework, the role of the Council of Europe insofar as it is an institution representative of the great democratic Europe must be pointed out. You are the collective conscience of the European peoples. Spaniards are well aware of the value of this voice of conscience for those who yearn for freedom. This is the Council of Europe's proper and irreplaceable role, which will even be reinforced with the passing of time.

In my opinion, the entire mission of the Council of Europe could be summarised in a single phrase: the guarantee, the defence and the promotion of freedom and democracy. These goals are also those which inspire the Spanish Government. Allow me to touch briefly on each facet of this mission.

Everyone knows that the cornerstone of the Council of Europe lies in its effort to collectively guarantee freedom and democracy. In this, as in so many things, the Council of Europe has been a pioneer. Even its Statute limits membership to those European states that are founded on human rights and the democratic system. Subsequently, the Council of Europe evolved into the most complete system of international protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including not only the European Convention on Human Rights, but also documents such as the European Social Charter and the European Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers.

Insofar as Spain is concerned, both our Constitution and the laws enacted under it have drawn their inspiration — at times very directly — from these European documents. At the same time, we have made a great effort to ratify all the instruments and fully assume the obligations inherent in their respective control mechanisms.

As far as I can see, the danger threatening us here is that of self-complacency. In order to avoid it, we must remain constantly vigilant in our own countries, as well as here, in order to make up for any weakness or insufficiency. Within the Council of Europe, I think that the time has come to complete the system, giving all the attention they deserve to basic human rights in the economic, social and cultural fields, as well as to foreigners' rights — especially those of migrant workers — in order to promote equal treatment, not to mention the struggle against racism and xenophobia.

We must attempt to do all this in such a way that the existing mechanisms for protection, which in a sense are the victims of their own success, are not overburdened. Thus, special attention must be paid to strengthening them and to accelerating procedures.

In carrying out lasting improvements in the system guaranteeing human rights in Europe, the countries of the Council of Europe will acquire more credibility than ever before with a view to promoting respect for human rights all over the world. I am thinking in particular of the work being done by our countries within

the framework of the United Nations specialised agencies in the fight against infamies such as torture, people's forced disappearance and child labour.

If freedom and democracy are to be guaranteed, they must also be defended. We must not forget that democracy is, unfortunately, still an exception in our world. And, precisely because our countries are free and open, they are especially vulnerable to attack by those who take advantage of this freedom in order to strike at democracy. There is no greater assault against freedom and democracy, from wherever it may come, than violence — irrespective of its political trappings. Spain is very familiar with threats to freedom. Because we regained our own freedom only a short time ago, we are very attached to it, and during this brief space of time we have had to face up to attacks from both extremes.

Like Octavio Paz, I believe we must not give way to cowardice; we must defend democracy and not only guarantee its survival but foster its development.

The Council of Europe has also been particularly conscious of this threat and has responded to it, as is demonstrated by the adoption in 1977 of the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism, ratified by thirteen states, of which Spain is one. Unfortunately, this has not been enough, as acknowledged by this Assembly when it convened the Parliamentary Conference on the Defence of Democracy against Terrorism in Europe in 1980.

Your Assembly, echoing the concern felt by the European peoples, has repeated on several occasions that greater European co-operation is necessary in the fight against terrorism. Let us not forget that any attack against the democratic institutions of one of our countries is also an attack against the democratic system as a whole. Let no one think that he can escape this scourge by avoiding the issue. This short-sighted selfishness will not ultimately save him from the blows of terrorist violence. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that the democratic countries of Western Europe respond to this threat through firm, concerted and joint action. *(Applause)*

You, the representatives of the European peoples, have already stated your position. It is now up to the governments to meet the challenge. A partial, timid or purely technical response will not be enough. This phenomenon requires collective reflection at the highest political level. The Spanish Government, for its part, is ready and willing, as I have told different heads of state and government in Europe, and I will continue to do so.

I have every intention of continuing to insist on the need for such reflection until everyone is profoundly convinced.

In the final analysis, the best way to guarantee and defend democracy is to promote it, broaden it and consolidate it continuously. This means that democracy must imbue all facets of the social fabric. Democracy does not merely consist of voting for a parliament and a government every four or five years, although this is certainly of the utmost importance. Democracy is a way of life that makes its presence felt in schools and the university, in civic and professional associations, in places of work, in the towns and in the provinces. In short, it means achieving full citizen participation in the life of the community.

I should like in this connection to refer to two areas in which the activities of the Council of Europe have been particularly notable and which are also of special interest to our country. First, local democracy, the historic foundation of all democracy. As in so many other areas, the Council of Europe blazed a new trail in promoting dialogue among the European cities and regions through the convening of the Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe.

Spain, which is intensely involved in the process of setting up local and regional autonomous communities, is an active participant in the work of the Council of Europe in this field. More specifically, we are interested in the European Charter of Local Autonomy becoming soon a reality.

It has been said that freedom and democracy exist mainly in men's minds. It is therefore not surprising that

the Council of Europe has made a special effort to promote education and culture, as well as the role played in this field by the media. The overcoming of “élitism” has led the Council of Europe to promote notions such as “cultural democracy” and “sport for all”, which have had a great influence in all of our countries. We can only encourage the Council to persevere along these lines, and try to make sure that its work in this field is not limited to bringing together experts or specialists, but rather that those who produce culture and are involved in all its forms may be called upon to play an active part.

Finally, we must not forget that the future of democracy lies with youth. If young people cannot find the answers to their problems, their anxieties and their aspirations in the democratic system, we run the very grave risk that they will seek other alternatives. I am especially concerned by the fact that, in these times of economic crisis, many young people on leaving school are unable to find employment. They cannot find a place in society. It is estimated that there are now between 8 and 9 million young people out of work in the member countries of the Council of Europe. This is not only an economic and social problem, but also a political problem of the greatest magnitude. We cannot afford to remain indifferent to it.

I recently received a letter from a youth trade union organisation proposing that European governments meet to deal jointly with the problem of youth unemployment, and also attempt jointly to find solutions. This is a challenge facing us just one year before International Youth Year. For my part, I am willing to back up this suggestion and support the holding of a European intergovernmental conference on youth unemployment, which could be planned with the participation of the Council of Europe and other European institutions concerned.

Mr President, distinguished members of the Parliamentary Assembly, Europe’s position in the world has changed radically since the second world war. From being a nerve centre of international relations, Europe has become the theatre for the rivalries between the two superpowers. In the decades following the second world war, this process was completed by the progressive emancipation of the peoples of the Third World who, up till then, had suffered colonial domination by various European countries.

All this meant, as pointed out by Toynbee, that, following the “Eurocentrism” that had prevailed until the early part of this century, the focus of history became worldwide. Europeans have had to adjust their actions to an authentic Copernican revolution in international relations. This is the profound significance of the long march towards European integration as the only way to adequately meet the challenge that the new circumstances present for Europe’s survival as an actor on the stage of international politics.

It is essential to understand — and not everybody does — that European unity cannot only be forged from the outside in but that this must also be done from the inside out. Europe’s historic identity has precisely consisted of reaching out towards the world. Europe has never been an “Empire of the middle”, closed and self-sufficient, like ancient China. Any attempt to build a selfish and introverted Europe, apart from not serving the true interests of Europeans, would irrevocably be doomed to failure.

However, it must be acknowledged that up till now efforts aimed at building Europe have not taken this fact sufficiently into account, perhaps because it was thought essential during the first stage to place emphasis on the strengthening of ties among the European countries. Perhaps too, the withdrawal reaction after the fall of an empire, which we Spaniards have experienced during the course of our own history, has also been a factor. The fact is that Europe today continues to a large extent to be obsessed by its own problems. This is something that it is necessary and urgent to overcome.

This goal cannot be achieved by each European country acting in isolation. Separately, we do not have sufficient capacity to undertake such a major project. Each one of us can contribute our experience, our relations, or a particular interest in one geographical area or another. But only by working together shall we be able to carry out the rebuilding of relations between Europe and the rest of the world.

In this task, the role to be played by the European institutions — both the Communities and the Council of Europe — must be defined. With regard to the Council, it must be acknowledged that despite the efforts by some members, both in the Assembly and on the Committee of Ministers, there has not been sufficient

involvement in this respect. Nevertheless, the Council of Europe has obvious potential. In the first place, because it is composed of twenty-one states from northern, southern, central and peripheral Europe, as well as Atlantic, neutral and non-aligned states, but also because the Council of Europe's main *raison d'être* is that of defending and promoting human rights and democracy. This is its banner cry and its mission, and this must also be the message to be carried persuasively by Europeans to all the corners of the earth.

In discussing Europe's relationship with the rest of the world, let us look around us. The first thing we see is that today's Europe is incomplete; it is an amputated Europe. This forms part of the political realities that emerged after the second world war. We must accept it as such, but nevertheless we cannot feel satisfied. Therefore, in the face of all difficulties we must keep open tide channels for dialogue and co-operation which have been so laboriously set up over the past few years. In this connection, we did our utmost to contribute towards the success of the Madrid meeting of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. Now, the opening of the Conference on Security and Confidence-building Measures and Disarmament in Europe in Stockholm gives us cause for hope that the channels of communication will indeed remain open and, furthermore, that effective measures will be adopted for increasing the confidence and security of which all the European peoples are in such great need.

The Council of Europe also has a role in this task, as your Assembly has well understood, in keeping the situation in non-member countries and our relations with them constantly under study. I think that, with a little imagination, it will be possible to promote pragmatic and flexible mechanisms in order that the non-member European states — of which I particularly have in mind Finland and Yugoslavia — may participate more actively in specific activities of our organisation.

The second area of interest consists of the other countries which, together with ours, are members of OECD: that is, the rest of the industrialised market-economy states which share our way of life and political organisation. I believe that all of us are affected, although to differing degrees, by the consequences of the economic crisis and — looking ahead — will all have to meet the challenges of the post-industrial society. It seems to me extremely important that we seek to establish co-ordination with them in the basic areas of our social organisation. The Strasbourg Conference convened by your Assembly a few months ago, with the foresight so often characterising it, was aimed at this goal. Here I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the chief promoter of this idea, your predecessor in the presidency, Mr President, and my fellow countryman, Mr José Maria de Areilza.

While these tasks are important, none of them can replace that of bringing about a *rapprochement* between Western Europe and what is conventionally called the Third World. This is a vast collection of countries, very different from one another, in which two-thirds of the world's population live. They are areas of the world over which Europe formerly held ascendancy or maintained direct rule. Following the timely ending of colonialism, Europe must find new ways to approach these countries, because these peoples also need us. They seek our presence in order not to find themselves locked in the dialectics of bipolarity.

I am sure you will understand that, from among the varied collection of Third World countries, a Spaniard such as myself would want to make a special reference to Latin America or, as we call it, *Iberoamerica*. In the same way that we feel very close to that continent, I trust that America also means for you the “name of a human hope”, as Alfonso Reyes called it.

Unfortunately, Latin America today is overwhelmed by problems that exceed its ability to solve them without outside help. It is enough to mention the uncontrolled population growth, the stranglehold of the foreign debt and the struggle to find peaceful and democratic solutions to authoritarian regimes.

In particular, tension and violence in Central America continue to be a constant threat to peace. Spain has unreservedly supported the efforts of the Contadora group in seeking a negotiated political settlement to the crisis in the region. Europe cannot remain aloof from this situation; it must make its voice heard and provide concrete aid in order to help these peoples emerge from the suffering in which they are plunged. (*Applause*)

On the other hand, there is hope from the southern end of the continent. In recent months, a country as

important as Argentina has peacefully regained democracy. We trust that other Latin American countries, especially in the southern cone, will soon follow its lead.

Europe must show its solidarity with the Latin American peoples in their struggle for freedom, democracy and socio-economic development. It is important for Latin America that Europe knows about its problems. I should like it, for example, if representatives of the democratic parties of Latin America, from both governments and oppositions, were to come to this Assembly or to the European Parliament in order to express their desires and aspirations, directly and without intermediaries. The Assembly should perhaps also send a mission to Latin America to get to grips with the reality of the situation. This should be the first step. It should be followed by others, chiefly consisting of a greater effort on the part of Europe, not only in condemning dictatorships but also in effectively aiding democracies.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, on the threshold of the year 1984, made famous by the title of George Orwell's well-known novel, a kind of fatalistic pessimism seems to pervade our societies. Many can already visualise in our midst this dehumanised and soulless world, dominated by omnipresent technology wielded by absolute power — or even the threat of total destruction as a result of upsetting what is significantly called the "balance of terror".

However, I believe that Orwell was not making a prophecy in his book; he was warning us, using a parable in which he depicts a nightmare from which he wants us to keep away at all costs.

For my part, I wish to reaffirm here my faith and confidence in man and in his ability to build a better world. It falls to us to develop a truly free and prosperous Europe, where technological progress will be used for the benefit of all, in a spirit of brotherhood and solidarity. The Council of Europe is working towards this goal. In accomplishing its noble task, it can count on our eager participation. Thank you very much, Mr President.