

Address given by Nicole Fontaine at the opening session of the Laeken European Council (14 December 2001)


Caption: On 14 December 2001, at the opening session of the Laeken European Council, Nicole Fontaine, President of the European Parliament, welcomes the Declaration on the Future of the European Union and emphasises the importance of the Community method in strengthening the European institutions.

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Speech by Mrs Nicole FONTAINE, President of the European Parliament, at the opening session of the Laeken European Council (14 December 2001)

Prime Minister, President-in-Office of the Council of the Union,
President of the Finnish Republic,
President of the French Republic,
Chancellors,
Prime Ministers,
President of the European Commission,
High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy,
Ministers,

As you know, on 15 January 2002 the European Parliament will elect its new President for the second half of its parliamentary term. This changeover gives each of our fifteen Member States, however large or small its population, a greater chance of seeing one of its citizens elected to the most senior office within Parliament.

This is, therefore, the last time that I shall have the honour of speaking to you in my current capacity.

I should like to start by saying how much I have appreciated the welcome you have always extended to me, whether at the quarterly European Council meetings, during the visits I have made to the various Union countries, or in the course of the many other dealings we have had with each other.

My thanks go in particular to the five Union Presidencies which have coincided with my term of office: Finland, Portugal, France, Sweden and, today, Belgium. You have shown your respect for and listened to the views of the European Parliament, through the person of its President, and I thank you on its behalf.

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This favourable assessment of the last two-and-a-half years extends to our interinstitutional relations.

At the time of the 1999 European elections, the institutional triumvirate had been destabilised by the enforced resignation of the previous Commission. I leave office, therefore, with the feeling that that difficult period, which was a source of great concern to me, is now, happily, behind us.

We now have at our disposal the procedures fundamental to balanced cooperation between, on the one hand, the Commission and Parliament, and, on the other, the Council and Parliament.

As regards the Commission and Parliament, the framework agreement we signed last year clarified the arrangements governing our relations on the basis of the Treaties. That framework agreement is working satisfactorily, even though on some occasions, such as now, Parliament would like to see more detailed, stricter timetables for legislative work drawn up at an even earlier stage so that it can exercise its power of democratic scrutiny effectively.

As regards the Council and Parliament, the codecision procedure, which covers legislation in almost 50 areas of policy, has proved its worth, given that, in particular following the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam, it has been simplified and improved in such a way that the majority of procedures are completed without conciliation being required - 71% today, as against 60% when codecision was first introduced. We can be proud of the fact that our relations are now on a proper, settled footing, although there is still considerable scope for improvement. I am confident that the Spanish Presidency, which will have many procedures to see through to completion, will continue this good work.

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from this favourable assessment is that in 2004 a recommendation should be made urging the broader application of this balanced procedure, which brings together, in equal measure, the national and Community sources of the democratic legitimacy enjoyed by the European

institutions.

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Turning to the matters on your agenda, and, first and foremost, your consideration of the future of the European Union and the reforms required, Parliament welcomes, Mr President, the open-minded approach which informs the policy note you have prepared as an introduction to your proceedings.

'Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come,' as Victor Hugo said. The time has now come to discuss openly all the questions which the citizens of Europe are asking themselves regarding an appropriate blueprint for the future of the Union, faced, as it is, with the increasing liberalisation of world trade, which is challenging the rule of the single market, and the revolution in its affairs which will be brought about by the virtual doubling in the number of Member States.

This is why the European Parliament is calling for the remit of the Convention which will prepare the IGC to be clearly defined, but open-ended. The objective is to secure the endorsement of our States and our peoples for a project which rethinks the principles underlying a united Europe without undermining its achievements. What is needed is a clear, all-embracing vision based on an approach which is qualitative as much as institutional.

What history will perhaps come to call 'the Laeken Declaration' must mobilise the energies of a united continent which will soon have almost half a million inhabitants whose expectations Vis-à-vis the Union go considerably beyond institutional issues, as yesterday's trade union demonstrations showed. In order to secure or increase popular support for the Union, European democracy must be given fresh impetus by means of transparency and open debate.

In the same context, Parliament is adamant that a dialogue must be established with civil society which continues throughout the proceedings of the Convention.

Above all, however, Parliament hopes that the major reform to be undertaken in 2004 will highlight the importance of the Community method, on grounds of realism rather than ideology. If the European institutions are not strengthened, once the Union has almost 30 Member States unanimity will be virtually impossible to achieve and cooperation based merely on goodwill between governments, something which is clearly necessary, but whose limits have repeatedly been demonstrated, will constantly founder on the specific national interests of one Member State or another.

Looking ahead to that time, excessive use of the intergovernmental method would merely serve to undermine the ability of the Union to exercise political leadership commensurate with its economic strength.

The Community method also represents the means of safeguarding one of the most valuable achievements of the European integration process, an achievement which can easily be called into question, as it was recently, albeit no doubt wrongly, against the background of specific circumstances linked to the international situation: the feeling which each country has, regardless of the size of its population, that it is a fully-fledged member of the Union.

The European Parliament would like the final text which the Convention submits to the European Council and the Intergovernmental Conference to be a 'single and coherent proposal'. It also takes the view that the period of time which elapses between the presentation of the outcome of the Convention's work and the opening of the IGC must be as short as possible, so that the impetus behind this process of drafting a Constitution can be maintained.

In the European Parliament's view, a Constitution for the Union, with the European Charter of Fundamental Rights as the preamble, should give tangible form to the work of the Convention and the forthcoming IGC. The resolution on the future of the Union which our Assembly adopted on 29 November 2001 sets out a wide range of suggestions and proposals regarding the working methods to be employed by the Convention

and the composition of the Bureau and the Convention itself. They are the result of lengthy debates within Parliament and they received massive support from the plenary. I have no doubt that you will take them into consideration.

As a final remark on this issue, I should like to add that the presidents of the national parliaments of several applicant countries - not to say all twelve - have expressed to me their wish to be represented on the Bureau. I pass on that request to you. Any step taken to demonstrate that the applicant countries are fully involved in this major reform process, which will, of course, affect them, can only help to consolidate public support for membership of the Union, support which, in some countries, is weakening as the wait prior to accession drags on.

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In that connection, the Commission, followed by the General Affairs Council, has sent out a clear signal by stating that at least ten countries will be in a position to join the Union before 2004 and thus take part in the next European elections.

May I draw your attention, however, to the adverse impact which such a statement might have on public opinion in Romania and Bulgaria, left on the sidelines without a fixed date for accession to the Union?

I hope that they will be given an opportunity to catch up. Should it ultimately emerge that the countries in question do not meet the accession criteria, our responsibility would be to lay down with them a clear timetable demonstrating that they are already 'part of the European family'.

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Turning to the fight against international terrorism, the tragic events of 11 September have given the Union the opportunity to demonstrate its political cohesion, to strengthen its international credibility and to make spectacular progress towards the establishment of a joint area of freedom, security and justice.

On 5 September the European Parliament submitted to the Council four recommendations emphasising the urgent need for the European Union to take action in that area. I am delighted that our three institutions should have decided to act on those recommendations promptly. The European Parliament is particularly pleased that agreement has finally been reached on the European arrest warrant. I can tell you assured that, at its extraordinary

Part-session next Monday, the European Parliament will approve the introduction of an instrument for which it has campaigned so strongly, in a manner consistent with the individual rights and freedoms we solemnly proclaimed in the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The Europe which has demonstrated unreserved solidarity with the United States, but which has used its influence to ensure that the response to the events of 11 September has not degenerated into simple acts of vengeance, to rule out any risk of a fatal breach with Arabs and Muslims in Europe and throughout the world, to draw the world's attention to the danger of a humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan; the Europe which played host in Bonn to the inter-Afghan conference, Mr Schröder, so as to be present on the ground with the aim of providing humanitarian aid, clearing mines, curbing disorder and preparing the reconstruction of the country; that Europe has not disappointed its citizens, and that is to your credit.

However, this Laeken Summit must acknowledge that a foreign policy without a military component is toothless. The progress made at the Capabilities Commitment Conference represents a step forward, one that I warmly welcome. It is now incumbent on you to resolve the issues concerning the operation and funding of the rapid reaction force, thereby making a defence Europe a reality so that the Union can contribute more effectively to the prevention of conflicts and the management of their consequences, in particular their humanitarian consequences. This will be the yardstick against which the determination of the Member States to move forward together and the credibility of the Union will be measured.

It would be different if tomorrow Europe were to agree to extradite alleged criminals facing the death penalty which the United States has so few scruples about imposing, all the more so if they were to be judged by military tribunals, a procedure whose inappropriateness, Mr Chirac, you have quite rightly emphasised.

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This year of 2001 is coming to an end against the background of major progress in the sphere of European integration and the substantial enhancement of Europe's image. In addition to the advances I have referred to in the fight against terrorism, in fifteen days' time the peaceful revolution of the euro will come to pass, a revolution which will affect more than 300 million Europeans. In that connection, may I take this opportunity to applaud the excellent cooperation between our institutions, under the codecision procedure, which cleared the way for the adoption, in six months, of the regulation on transfrontier payments. By taking action so effectively, we have sent out an important message to our fellow citizens.

We are aware, Mr Blair, of your determination to ensure that, if possible, your country will soon be preparing to embrace the single currency, a step which might serve to encourage the other countries still outside the euro area to follow suit.

Thanks to the European Union's work the elections in Kosovo were conducted in a peaceful, orderly manner, with all the ethnic communities taking part. The changes to the country's Constitution adopted by the Macedonian Parliament with a view to acknowledging the increased rights granted to the Albanian population raise hopes of a political solution to the problems affecting that country.

However, despite Europe's efforts the cancer which is eating away at world peace and, by so doing, lending succour to terrorism has still to be eradicated in the Middle East, where the situation is worsening every day.

Last Wednesday in Strasbourg, as it does every year, the European Parliament awarded the Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought. This year, exceptionally, the prize was shared between three winners. In addition to an Angolan bishop, a reminder that war often lurks below the surface of life in Africa, it jointly honoured an Israeli woman and a Palestinian man, each of whom has lost a child, the former her daughter in a Palestinian suicide attack, the latter his son to bullets fired by the Israeli army as he went to the help of a classmate in the courtyard of their school.

Both have refused to meet hatred with hatred and, despite their shattered lives, have continued to campaign for understanding and peace. For its part, by awarding this prize the European Parliament was endeavouring to help the prospect of peace overcome the reality of war, to show that tolerance and understanding can prevail in the face of hatred, and to foster hope on both sides of the ethnic divide, in defiance of the acts perpetrated with the aim of snuffing out that hope.

However, it is high time that the spiral of events which is dragging two peoples towards collective suicide was brought to a halt. The arrest of the terrorists and their sponsors is a pressing duty for the Palestinian Authority, assuming that it can fulfil that duty, weakened as it is by the challenges to its rule. However, when young suicide bombers come forward in such numbers, because they have been convinced that there is no hope of justice for their people, the fight against terrorism itself will be fruitless if the discontents it feeds on are not addressed.

Given the desperate impasse we have now reached, the deployment of a significant number of international observers, or even an international peace-keeping force, would at the very least serve as a temporary measure to calm the situation before it is too late.

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The United Nations has declared the decade from 2001 to 2010 the 'Decade for a culture of peace and non-violence for all the children of the world'.

I hope that the European Union will support this initiative and recommend the implementation of practical measures designed to bring home to our young people the importance of non-violence, open-mindedness and tolerance.

On my own behalf, and on that of Parliament, I hope that this European Council will prove very successful and, despite all the problems facing us, I wish you an excellent 2002, for yourselves, for a united Europe and for the peoples over whose destiny you preside.

Thank you