

Statement by Wolfgang Schüssel on the European Constitution (Vienna, 28 June 2004)


Caption: On 28 June 2004, following the Brussels European Council held on 17 and 18 June, the Austrian Chancellor, Wolfgang Schüssel, calls on the Austrian Parliament to support the future European Constitutional Treaty.

Source: Erklärung Bundeskanzler Wolfgang Schüssel im Nationalrat. [ONLINE]. [Wien]: Bundeskanzleramt Österreich, [13.05.2005]. Disponible sur <http://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/DesktopDefault.aspx?TabID=3334&Alias=bka>.

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Statement by Federal Chancellor Wolfgang Schäussel in the Austrian National Assembly (28 June 2004)

Mr President, Honourable Members, in the next few weeks many important decisions will be taken about the direction in which Europe will move. On 1 May we celebrated the reunification of Europe with the accession of ten new EU Member States. Two weeks ago, for the first time, the peoples of Europe — 156 million individuals exercising their right to vote — freely elected a common parliament.

One week ago, at the European Council in Brussels, we reached agreement on Europe's first constitution — tomorrow, decisions will be taken on the top echelons of the Union over the next five years: decisions about the President of the European Commission, the European Foreign Minister and the Secretary-General.

These events, Honourable Members, are truly historic, especially if we view them in a longer time frame. Ninety years ago today, the heir to the Austrian throne and his wife were murdered in Sarajevo. That triggered a Europe-wide conflagration which developed into the First World War. That was followed by an unprecedented period of instability, especially in central Europe, and the Second World War was a direct consequence of those events.

Only now are we beginning — laboriously, painfully and with difficulty — to overcome the legacy of those tensions and problems. We do well, I think, to lift our gaze occasionally beyond the borders of Austria and try to see the bigger picture.

Why does Europe need a constitution at all? Almost a century ago, just a few metres from this spot, in the Austrian Imperial Council Chamber, Karl Renner said that, although nations would never cease fighting, what mattered was whether they fought with pitchforks and smashed one another's windows or whether they observed some sort of ground rules.

Honourable Members, we have those ground rules before us today in the form of a constitution for almost 500 million European Union citizens. It is the product of work by both parliamentarians in the European Convention and the 25 governments of the EU Member States. The next task is to convince our elected representatives and the people. That will not be entirely straightforward, for many of the expectations invested in the new constitution cannot easily be fulfilled. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the President of the Convention, wanted this constitution to be comprehensible to every schoolchild. But is it? In my opinion, a good deal of it is, but there is also much that is just too complicated. Certainly, a lot is comprehensible.

The basic objectives of the Union — full employment, a social market economy, protection of the environment and cultural diversity — or the 54 articles in the Charter of Fundamental Rights for every citizen can all be understood. Freedom of opinion is guaranteed, the death penalty is prohibited, gender equality is secured, as are basic social rights: and disputes about all these matters can be brought before the European Court of Justice.

Europe's citizens will be able to bring forward their own proposals. One million signatures will be enough to ensure that a citizens' initiative is considered by the European institutions — that is, the European Parliament and the Commission.

The institutions will also be organised in a more comprehensible manner. In future, Europe's leaders will include, as well as the President of the Commission, a European Council President with a longer term of office and, significantly, a European Foreign Minister who will be supported by a joint diplomatic service. Henry Kissinger once complained that he had no telephone number that he could call in Europe. Well, now there is one: there is a European Commission President and a European Foreign Minister.

Another development that is significant and, indeed, particularly meaningful in a democracy is the considerable strengthening of the European Parliament's powers. Almost all decisions — the proportion is 95 % — will be taken jointly with Parliament, and its voice will carry equal weight.

Alongside all these general points, Austria negotiated successfully for the inclusion of certain major national considerations of particular importance to us, and, in so doing, it improved the Convention's text. For example, our water and municipal services — including social services, health care, municipal waste disposal and traffic management — can remain under our control and can be funded by the municipalities themselves; parity among the Member States is guaranteed by the Constitutional Treaty; the Treaty also secures the protection of minorities and the protection of animals; and the principle of unanimous decision-making has been preserved even for some awkward issues such as the financial perspective, the creation of a European Public Prosecution Service or price stability, which has now been included in the list of objectives.

The Commission will have a stronger role than it currently has in the excessive deficit procedure. An Austrian-German joint statement (immediately supported by the Irish Council Presidency) calls for a conference to review Euratom: the statement bears our signature and represents a major success for our Foreign Minister.

Honourable Members, what has been achieved is a sensible compromise. Of course, some people will say that it would be more meaningful to eliminate unanimous decision-making entirely, because decisions can always be taken more quickly with majority voting. That is true, but two principles are involved here. The nation states and their specific features must be respected. Decision-making will also be easier, however, because we now have more majority voting: there are some 25 areas of decision-making that will require a majority rather than unanimity. Yet, at the same time, if small countries work together, it will not be so easy for the larger nations to override them.

From beginning to end of the Convention negotiations and the constitutional negotiations, we stayed with and contributed to a coalition of like-minded countries — both small and not so small — and in that way we achieved some major successes. For example, the minimum number of seats in the European Parliament has been increased from four to six. The largest Member State — and I appreciate Germany's helpful attitude here — actually loses three seats. For the very small countries, that represents an important shift.

The Spanish and Portuguese representatives wanted the population factor to carry greater weight than it does in the Convention text. Currently around one third of Europe's population can block a decision. We understand the point here. On the other hand, however, every decision must be supported by a clear majority of the Member States. The original number of Member States proposed by the Convention was 13; it has now changed to 15, or 55 %, of the Member States of the Union. Ultimately the strength of Austria's voice is much better protected than it would have been by the Convention proposal, so the arrangement is entirely acceptable to us.

Through the verification procedure for subsidiarity, we have substantially strengthened the role of the national parliaments. For the first time, there is a braking mechanism if the subsidiarity principle is suppressed or overlooked. One third of the national parliaments may challenge the Commission.

Honourable Members, there will, of course, be much that is complicated; even I do not fully understand — and I see the German Ambassador up in the gallery — how the voting procedure works in the committee that mediates between the *Bundestag* and the *Bundesrat*, yet Germany is a first-class democracy. There are many things here that will not be at all problematic for those who are intimately involved or for procedural experts. For the ordinary person in the street, it may not be imperative to understand everything.

It was significant for us that, while the large Member States currently have two Commissioners each and the medium-sized and smaller Member States one each, there will, in future, be one Commissioner for each Member State. All attempts to introduce a hierarchy or, indeed, to give the large Member States permanent seats on the Commission, while the smaller Member States rotated or effectively swapped their seats, were successfully repulsed. The new principle will apply for ten years and may be extended by a unanimous decision. If it proves its worth, then I think that it will be its own best advocate; if not, then we can revert to two-thirds representation on the basis of perfectly equal rotation.

Honourable Members, it took us a further week to agree the staffing arrangements. Even heads of government are mere mortals, and they simply cannot tackle two complex themes simultaneously. However, José Manuel

Barroso has now been selected by an overwhelming majority — almost unanimously, in fact — as the new President of the Commission, to lead it for the next five years.

On that score, there is one thing that I should like to say, for I know Mr Barroso well: he has worked with the European People's Party for many years, and for two years he has headed a national government. It is the same old story every time that someone new comes along: scarcely has he taken up office when the carping starts, he is accused of lacking charisma, of failing to see things through, of having problems on the domestic front, and so on and so forth.

José Manuel Barroso is a foreign policy professional of many years' standing, a man who achieved peace in Angola by dint of hard work. Two years ago, he took over as Prime Minister of Portugal and proceeded to reduce its alarming budget deficit significantly, prune its overblown administration and prove himself as a leader with the qualities required to steer the country. The fact that he has now organised an outstandingly successful European Nations Football Championship may not be relevant here, but it is another achievement that has certainly impressed the Portuguese people generally. *And* their team has already made it through to the semi-finals!

I would therefore urge that we extend our trust to this man, because trust and support are what the Commission will need, particularly in the interests of the smaller and medium-sized countries. Since his appointment also reflects the wish of the majority of Europe's population, he will have Austria's full support.

The same applies to Europe's new Foreign Minister, Javier Solana. He is a man who has proved his worth, he is a Social Democrat, and I have known him for many years. As a Foreign Minister myself, I enjoyed a good cooperative working relationship with him. I look forward to continued cooperation with him under new auspices. He will now have a double mandate, from the governments at Council level and from the Commission, and, in my opinion, that constitutes a very successful form of cooperation.

I am grateful to all those countries that worked with us and to our own Foreign Minister, whose outstanding achievement has been to highlight the value of the central European partnership for the first time. That partnership functioned most impressively. So my thanks go to our Foreign Minister, to the Foreign Ministry team and to the Federal Chancellor's Office, to the members of the Convention and to the parliamentarians who backed our efforts unceasingly.

I would therefore ask you, Honourable Members, to support the text of this constitution which we shall have before us in approximately one month's time, once it has been duly authorised and scrutinised by the legal experts. I would ask you, as soon as possible after the signing of this treaty — which will probably take place in Rome in October — to ratify it. Equipped with this constitution, the European Union will be in a position to play its proper role in greater Europe and in the world.

Honourable Members, we shall also propose to you today a reorganisation of the Federal Government. Two colleagues have joined us on the Government bench: Karin Miklautsch, who, as of today, takes over the important task of heading the Justice Ministry, and Eduard Mainoni, who assumes the post of Junior Minister in the Federal Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology.

Former Justice Minister Dieter Böhmdorfer and Reinhart Waneck, Junior Minister in the Ministry of Health, have left the Government team. I should like to thank both of them for their contribution. They were members of the Government for more than four years and have worked hard on Austria's behalf. I am particularly pleased to note that the Opposition has also recognised this and has complimented them on their achievements. I would, however, suggest that on some occasions it is better to invest a degree of trust in advance rather than waiting until someone is leaving to tell them that they actually did a great job. Perhaps, Honourable Members, we might try that approach with the new members of Government.

Politics is not easy: everyone sitting in this Chamber today knows that. No one is a born Cabinet Minister, Junior Minister, Head of Government or MP: these are jobs that have to be learned. What you begin with is a certain aptitude, an inquiring mind, specific skills and the ability to network — that is all part of the package.

What has to be done right now, however, is to carry forward the successful work that this Government began when it was sworn in 16 months ago.

Much progress has been made, Honourable Members. A substantial part of the Government's programme for this parliamentary term has been achieved or is under way, and the people currently complaining that nothing is moving are the very same people who, just a few weeks ago, were complaining that too much was happening too quickly. I'm afraid that you can't have it both ways!

In the first half of this year alone we have agreed a tax reform package that reduces the national tax burden by EUR 3 billion. Every tax payer will feel the benefit of this reform, and it will help employment. Two and half million Austrians will no longer have to pay tax. It means support for families, and it means securing Austria as a location for business and securing jobs.

Just a few weeks ago, we adopted a Federal Protection of Animals Act that is unique in Europe — and I am grateful for your unanimous support there. This is a model piece of legislation which, for the first time, considers animals as sentient creatures rather than things or objects and in which we have also acknowledged the needs of small family farming businesses. The Act has already attracted considerable attention internationally, and I hope that it will be widely emulated.

Reform of criminal procedure is another area that has been under discussion for decades and on which we now have new legislation. The Public Prosecution Service will be the lead agency in preliminary proceedings; the security services will do the groundwork; legal protection and the protection of victims will automatically be strengthened.

Parental part-time work is another example. We have new legislation in this field that has no direct parallel anywhere in the world. It finally gives practical expression to the idea of reconciling work and family, and it successfully combines family concerns and economic concerns, which of course may differ.

Then there was the splendid reform during our last plenary session that completely changed the landscape for research. This was a real milestone: the concept was supported by a broad majority including the Green Party on the Opposition benches; it had been under discussion for decades, and now it is law. Professor Felderer of the Institute for Advanced Studies says that Austria has now become one of Europe's most attractive research locations.

Or take the example of the Federal Railways reform! Agreement was reached here, including on service regulations, in a process that began a year ago and has now been concluded: the Austrian Railways management and board, the trade union and the Ministry all worked together, under the expert leadership of the Vice-Chancellor, to produce that agreement, and it puts our national railway company in much better shape to compete in the transport market.

Then, just a week ago, we had the proposals from the Armed Forces Reform Commission ably headed by Professor Helmut Zilk. A sweeping overhaul of our armed forces is envisaged in order to create a contemporary, modern army, and the National Security Council, meeting last Friday, has already unanimously adopted a host of recommendations to that effect. Anyone who claims that we are dragging our feet here is missing or deliberately overlooking what is happening.

'Team 04' is yet another reform project affecting our security services. The Federal Minister, Ernst Strasser, has produced a concept for merging our police and gendarmerie services, a measure that should have been taken several decades ago. A trial of the new system is already under way, and it will be fully operational by mid-2005. The aim is to deploy our personnel efficiently to provide security in the best interests of our citizens. And that is what we are doing!

The same applies to the reform and harmonisation of the pension system. A year ago, we adjusted the system to bring it into line with demographic trends by raising the age for early retirement, and we are currently negotiating the necessary and equitable harmonisation of all our pension systems. We are making good

progress: we have held, I think, some 20 to 25 meetings with employers' and workers' representatives, and we have reached a stage where we can realistically hope to present our proposals before the summer recess.

Honourable Members, there is no question of halting the reform process. Our new Government colleagues are joining a fit and capable team which is working under high pressure. We look forward to working with them, and I wish them strength and success as well as good luck in their respective departments. I hope that they will also receive a measure of encouragement from both the Opposition and the Government parties.

Our workload has not diminished. We have just embarked on the revenue equalisation process, we are in the middle of health reform and we shall start during the summer to prepare the next budget round. These are three important tasks in which we invite the new members of the Government to work with us.