

Address given by Pat Cox to the Thessaloniki European Council (19 June 2003)

Caption: On 19 June 2003, Pat Cox, President of the European Parliament, expresses to the Thessaloniki European Council his satisfaction with the draft Constitutional Treaty for the European Union.

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Address given by Pat COX, President of the European Parliament, to the Thessaloniki European Council (19 June 2003)

Mr President,

President Giscard d'Estaing will present to you tomorrow the outcome of the Convention's deliberations, but let me, in the light of Parliament's first debate yesterday, place on the record Parliament's strong congratulations to him and to his colleagues in the Convention for the remarkable result. He and his colleagues have produced a draft Constitutional Treaty which is clear, which is balanced, which is based on a single option, and which could work - the ultimate vindication of Parliament's belief in the Convention method as an open, inclusive participatory and democratic preparation for an Intergovernmental Conference.

It is also innovative - unprecedented in scope and substance. An operation which was originally conceived as addressing some leftover business from Nice, and which was broadened to answer a catalogue of questions from Laeken, has now produced a constitutional blueprint, with a broad institutional balance.

It proposes a legal personality for the Union.

It incorporates the Charter for Fundamental Rights.

It simplifies decision-making, and removes the artificial 'pillar' structure.

It provides adequate controls to respect subsidiarity.

It stipulates that when Council discusses and adopts legislation, it must do so in public.

It clarifies better than before who does what.

It provides for a unified Foreign Affairs structure under a Minister responsible to you, but accountable to Parliament.

It extends qualified majority voting.

It strengthens the legitimacy of the Commission.

It broadens parliamentary control over legislation - national parliaments, and the European Parliament.

It simplifies the language, and consolidates the rule-book in a manageable form.

These 12 achievements alone represent a radical improvement on our existing Treaties way beyond the original expectations that we may have had, and beyond the progress made at previous Intergovernmental Conferences. The first reactions in the European Parliament have broadly endorsed the result. I have followed some of the reactions from the Governments of the Member States, and I have read some of the comments in national newspapers. No-one is satisfied 100%. Everybody could think of different improvements on different articles. But to draw up a balanced project for tomorrow's Europe, to which have contributed the national parliaments and governments - representing 28 sovereign States with proud histories - the European Commission and the European Parliament, and to get a coherent result, is something which should not be minimised. It should not be lightly discarded or unbundled. Those who seek to unravel the broad consensus which was created would bear the responsibility of a result which would be the lowest common denominator, precisely the result which the Convention wished to avoid - and managed.

Some further work is required, and the Convention has expressed a wish to complete its work on Parts 3 and 4 of the Constitutional Treaty in the first two weeks in July. I hope that you will authorise the Convention to proceed in this way, in particular as regards the third part of the Treaty on the policies of the Union, which raises questions which are far from technical. We hope that the Convention will find the means to avoid gridlock on European Union decision-making, with excessive reliance on the veto mechanism. In this way, it will achieve coherence with the rest of the text which responds to the double challenge of enhanced democracy and greater efficiency.

I know it is your intention, Mr President, to take a decision today to convene an IGC later this year. I welcome the approach that the Conference should be relatively short and should conclude its work in good time before the 2004 European elections. I welcome as well the Presidency's commitment, which we strongly back, that the Accession States will play a full and equal role in the IGC.

I would also ask that you consider how best to associate the European Parliament with the working of the

IGC. There is widespread recognition that in previous IGCs parliamentary participation played an important and constructive role. I think it is in the logic of progress that that role should be enhanced in the dispositions that you make for the IGC that will be convened under the Italian Presidency. I seek from you a decision to give broad clearance to the Italian Presidency to explore this issue with us.

Having the Treaty agreed well before the next European elections is important. Our citizens have the right to know what they are voting for, what role this Parliament is destined to have in the wider Europe. I also hope that the new Treaty can contribute to making the next elections to the European Parliament the first real European elections.

When he presented the text to the Convention on Friday last, President Giscard d'Estaing said it was engendered in a "mélange de crainte et d'espoir, saupoudré d'un peu de rêve". That third ingredient depends on your leadership.

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The Leaders seated around this table are all initiated in the mechanisms of the decision-making procedures of the European Union. But we have to recognise that, outside this room, the European Union faces a mountain of public confidence to be climbed. Whatever the final outcome of the Treaty itself, enthusiasm for the European project will only be rekindled if Europe addresses the concerns of our citizens, and if Europe delivers. Our electors are blithely indifferent to questions of qualified majority voting and subsidiarity; they want action on jobs, on security and on peace. They are less interested in how we organise the input, more concerned with our output capacity.

I therefore welcome the fact that at this European Council you will also be addressing issues of direct concern to Europeans. Europe is in the middle of a worrying downturn in economic activity. The scale of the European budget and the resources available to us mean that the real solutions are not to be found at the European but at the national level. But within the limited resources available, and using existing instruments, including the EIB, it must be possible to support initiatives for growth while respecting the imperative of financial stability. The Commission should be encouraged to bring forward a growth action plan to supplement the actions of national governments. I very much welcome the top priority being given by the incoming Italian Presidency to growth because, as the Italian Foreign Minister rightly points out, while there can be no growth without stability, it is difficult to preserve stability without growth. Of course, growth will not be produced unless Member States take the path of economic reform. Those Member States which have embarked on this difficult and sometimes painful process deserve the political and moral support of the European Institutions, because on their efforts Europe's economic recovery will depend. We should not wait passively for an upturn in the United States; we should do some heavy lifting by ourselves.

At the Spring European Council, you gave a mandate to the three Institutions to work on an agreement on better lawmaking. Thanks in particular to the Greek Presidency, and to Mr Yiannitsis, we have a good compromise, and precisely because the three Institutions recognised that there was a common interest which was paramount, beyond the narrow institutional prerogatives.

The current agreement is an important staging post, because the Institutions have flagged up a common approach on how to make our lawmaking better, more transparent, more rigorously applied in the Member States, and, where possible, bringing in a lighter regulatory framework, so that Europe's competitiveness is enhanced and not undermined at the European level.

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Just as improving the economic regulatory framework should not await the ratification of a Constitutional Treaty, so we need to make progress now on the complex and related issues of immigration, frontiers and asylum. There is so much to be done - and you recognise the priority for this - that I feel the Commission should be given a broad mandate to launch a series of initiatives in the months ahead, and you should set a timetable for decision up to May 2004, in accordance with the Tampere programme, and we should together

work out an adequate budgetary framework, so that the costs of a common and effective immigration policy are shared fairly. More Europe and a more structured, coherent and constructive European approach can bring a real added value for Member States in advancing these complex policy issues.

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Mr President, our great enlargement project is on track. The process is now irreversible and has been greatly stimulated by the excellent referendum results in the Accession States. Parliament perceives this fifth enlargement as a two-stage process. We have warmly endorsed the 2007 target date for Bulgarian and Romanian accession, and we commend a clear timetable for the end of negotiations.

We support the revised accession partnership with Turkey and encourage the Turkish Government to continue vigorously on the path of democratic reform before the assessment is made next year.

We note and welcome signs of renewed diplomatic activity by the United States on the Cyprus question. But Cyprus, politically and geographically, is a special challenge for us, as Europeans, involving in the front line a Member State, an Accession State, and a State with a vocation to join the European Union. Europe must raise its game and give an extra spur to reaching a settlement in the coming months. External help and support is welcomed, but it cannot be a substitute for European leadership.

On our future strategy for the West Balkans, I hope to be able to inform the special meeting on Saturday as to Parliament's approach, but preparation for the next stage of enlargement also requires a greater urgency in our relations with our neighbours on the southern banks of the Mediterranean. I have been working closely with President Kaklamanis of the Hellenic Parliament and President Casini of the Italian Chamber of Deputies to ensure that the parliamentary dimension for the Barcelona Process moves to a new footing and takes shape before the end of the year.

Transatlantic relations are at the centre of all our concerns. In the EU/US Summit next week, you, Mr President, and Mr Prodi will have an opportunity to make Europe's contribution to transatlantic discussions on the Doha development agenda, the reconstruction of Iraq, on such issues as weapons of mass destruction and on the Middle East. Surely the time has come to define areas where the contribution of the EU, and our very considerable experience through a relationship of complementarity with the US, could bring visible and tangible European added value to the process. In the days before that Summit, I will be having discussions with a large number of congressional leaders on Capitol Hill. I am firmly of the view that a strengthened dialogue between legislators is a vital dimension to the quality of the relations between States. The US Congress, and increasingly in so many areas of policy, the European Parliament, are truly continental-scale legislatures, and key authorising environments for legislative action. Recognising and promoting such dialogue could enhance and develop the quality of EU/US relations.

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Mr President, let me raise two points of substance.

First, I am pleased that an agreement on the Statute of European Political Parties has been agreed by the General Affairs Council of 16 June 2003. The European Parliament voted today to endorse this agreement. In particular, I welcome this Statute because it contributes to the necessary transparency and accountability of the European Political Parties ahead of the next European Parliament elections in June next year.

When I met you last week, Mr President, I indicated that I would be raising the question of a common Statute for Members of the European Parliament.

An arrangement whereby Members of the same parliament have 15 - and shortly 25 - different legal and financial regimes is neither desirable nor tenable in the long term.

I believe European Institutions ought to seek European solutions to European challenges. On 4 June last, 323

Members of the European Parliament, more than the qualified majority of 314, voted in favour of a Statute for Members based on the principle of equality of treatment of Members. In parallel, the Bureau of the European Parliament unanimously approved a reform which will bring greater transparency and accountability to the allowances regime and, for the first time ever, proposes to pay Members' travel allowances only on the basis of actual cost recovery.

I am well aware of some outstanding issues between Council and Parliament, not least on those concerning primary law and taxation. However, I appeal to you to give a positive political signal to the General Affairs Council and to Parliament, indicating a determination to engage in serious dialogue on these points and to bring closure to this complex and longstanding dossier, which requires agreement by a majority in Parliament and a qualified majority in Council.

I invite your assistance on this issue, with a view to achieving now, as a matter of urgency, the right conditions to obtain the necessary qualified majority support in Council. If I may paraphrase Elvis Presley, it really is now or never. I ask you to speak with clarity on this issue, so that we can decide this matter once and for all.

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In closing, Mr President, I would like to pay tribute to you, your Ministers and your officials, for the excellent work of the Presidency and the remarkable cooperation with the European Parliament. You have tackled in a cool and efficient way some of the more difficult issues and have made real progress: financing Enlargement; liberalisation of the energy market; policy framework on Western Balkans; savings tax; administrative reform. You have made progress because you have worked in the Community interest and sought the highest possible level of compromise. And all of this in the most difficult of international situations which could so easily have blown us off-course.

However, Europe's demands on the Greek Presidency do not come to an end in Thessaloniki. We hope that in the remaining days, on some of the issues I have mentioned to you, we can make some of the last-minute breakthroughs that are so often how we work and how we succeed.

But, above all, Mr President, your Presidency will be remembered as the launching pad for a new Constitution for a new Europe. If you will allow me to paraphrase the enduring oration of Pericles to the Athenians:

"We [Europeans] decide public questions for ourselves or at least endeavour to arrive at a sound understanding of them, in the belief that it is not debate that is a hindrance to action, but rather not to be instructed by debate before the time comes for action."

Let this European Council be instructed by the debate in the Convention, and let it recognise that the time has now come for action.