

Address given by Nicole Fontaine to the Lisbon European Council (23 March 2000)

Caption: On 23 March 2000, Nicole Fontaine, President of the European Parliament, congratulates the European Council on having taken the initiative to define for the European Union a new strategic objective in order to create more jobs and strengthen economic reform and social cohesion as part of a knowledge-based economy.

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http://www.europarl.eu.int/president/Presidents_old/president_fontaine/president/speeches/en/sp0026.htm.

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Address given by Mrs Nicole Fontaine, President of the European Parliament to the European Council (Lisbon, 23 March 2000)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I should like to congratulate the President-in-Office of the Council on this particularly opportune and courageous initiative. The challenge it addresses is one which has to be taken up. Mr President, Parliament deeply appreciates both your gesture in attending the Strasbourg part-session in person before the Summit, and the ambitiousness of the goals you have set.

The European Community began as an economic one. Now that we have the euro, it has become a monetary community. The Kosovo tragedy has seen the emergence of a political community, and very recently, Europeans have become keenly aware of the intangible moral values on which their community is founded.

They are now looking to this European Council meeting to give shape to a social Europe.

Their expectations are extremely high, for three reasons:

- unemployment wrecks lives and societies for entire generations and, even though it is starting to fall, unemployment remains the main concern of Europe's citizens,
- the across-the-board return to economic growth means that we can do things today which were impossible yesterday,
- they are scandalised by untrammelled capitalism, whose relocations, social dumping, ruthless exploitation of the disparities between the social and fiscal legislation of the Member States and remorseless pursuit of profit at the expense of working men and women have a direct and traumatic impact on their lives, both as communities and as individuals.

For these three reasons their expectations of this Council meeting are extremely high. You must not let them down.

Europe's citizens are perfectly capable of grasping the fact that European harmonisation in the social sphere is anything but straightforward. They are also fully aware that social issues and employment are essentially the responsibility of national governments and that full employment cannot be brought about by decree but is, essentially, the result of economic growth.

But if the Union as such decides to intervene, they expect to know what the Union is undertaking to achieve, and they expect it really to do what it said it would.

This Council meeting merits the epithet of 'ground-breaking Council', even though it was preceded by the Luxembourg Summit. I am convinced that if it produces nothing but declarations of intent without concrete commitments, our citizens will refuse to accept this. And by concrete commitments I mean precise and timetabled objectives, such as the Presidency-in-Office's proposal to fix an annual growth rate objective of 3%, a proposal which Parliament supports.

Before addressing some of the new initiatives which you will be debating at this meeting, I should like to express the hope that various unfinished tasks which have been paralysed by indecision will be brought to a successful conclusion.

For example, for 30 years now the proposal for a European company statute has been blocked, because it involves the issue of worker participation in company management.

A previous European Council undertook to resolve this issue by 31 December 1998. This undertaking was solemnly given, and nothing whatsoever happened.

Quite apart from the fact that this endless waiting hardly enhances the Council's credibility, there are real

consequences: jobs are destroyed, and proposals for other directives are blocked by association, namely those on informing and consulting workers and on European works councils are blocked by association.

I could give you further examples, such as the proposal for a directive on working hours, which is the subject of a thorny conciliation procedure at this very moment.

How on earth can we expect European citizens to believe the fresh promises which this Council meeting will make, unless we prove that we are determined to put our political differences, our national interests and our respective economic cultures behind us in order to achieve acceptable compromises on issues like those I have just cited?

My question to you, the Heads of State and of Government, is this. Do you view these matters as still being live issues, and is the Council determined to resolve them within a reasonable space of time?

I would note that our legislative activity, when operating properly, is productive of highly results. I would call to mind, for example:

- establishing a legal framework conducive to developing fresh sources of employment;
- encouraging innovation, with the forthcoming adoption in the next few weeks of the directive on electronic commerce.

Without wanting to go into the details of the issues you will be working on here today, I would simply like to share with you Parliament's major concerns, as reflected in its voting and particularly the preparatory resolution on today's European Council meeting which it adopted only a week ago on 15 March.

Amongst these measures, I would stress, at the beginning of this summit, just how much the European Parliament is committed to the social model in all its aspects.

These include tolerance and respect for others in all their diversity. These are priceless values which must be upheld. That is why the European Parliament is extremely interested in the package of anti-discrimination measures which the Commission has just put forward and intends to make one of its priorities.

Given the public outrage to which such issues can give rise in Europe, Parliament is asking you to take the necessary measures to introduce balanced rules on company mergers within the European Union. The way in which some mergers have taken place since the establishment of the single market - sometimes as an adverse side effect of that development - is turning a lot of people against the whole process of European integration.

Of course, Parliament is aware of the overall advantage of encouraging healthy competition beyond national borders. However, on this very sensitive issue of mergers, we are asking you, first of all, to impose a ban on any mergers that do not comply with binding European legislation on prior notification and consultation of workers and secondly, to ensure that, before such mergers can take place, a serious assessment of their social impact is carried out so that the necessary accompanying social measures can be taken in time and, in particular, with the companies concerned.

Unregulated mergers, based merely on dominant capitalist concerns, have a devastating effect on the Union's social cohesion. That face of the European Union is unacceptable to men and women who wake up one morning to discover that the company they work for has changed hands and that they are at the mercy of their employer's economic strategy options. The effect on the lives of those people, their families and their entire region is traumatic and, let's face it, inhuman.

Among Parliament's various proposals, the idea of setting up an observatory of industrial change is of particular interest. In so far as such an establishment will be independent and will have appropriate resources to carry out its research, and its work is made public and can serve as a basis for democratic debate, it can make a powerful contribution to developing intergovernmental cooperation which, in this area of social

policy, remains predominant.

Among the Portuguese Presidency's general guidelines for a dynamic employment policy based on growth, which the European Parliament cannot but endorse, I wish to highlight the following:

- the importance attached to ongoing training, which is a prerequisite for ensuring that workers adapt to the constantly changing world of work,
- the qualitative modernisation of relations between employees and their employers, based on dignity, due acknowledgement of skills and promotion of initiative,
- the elimination of all forms of discrimination, bearing in mind that it is often indirect, which 50 years of European integration have not yet succeeded in eradicating,
- a fairer distribution of income between capital, which enables, and work, which produces,
- promotion of worker mobility, in particular through information, throughout the European Community,
- development of participation at all levels of economic and social life,
- a proactive approach by Europe to involvement in new economic activities relating to information technologies while ensuring that these do not create further forms of exclusion and social division.

I would also hope that your European Council meeting would show due concern for a section of the population in Europe which for what are often complex and extremely diverse reasons, finds itself willingly or unwillingly on the fringes of organised society.

I am referring to what is often called the 'fourth world', i.e. those people on the fringes of our society who are poorest and have nothing to look forward to, but on whom our most determined efforts will have no effect either because they are irrelevant to them or because they do not reach them. There are at present millions of such men and women across the Union and their number is increasing.

Public administrations are generally ill-suited, not through any lack of interest but by their very nature, to the job of helping such people. The most effective means of doing so remains the network of associations, based on voluntary work and people's generosity. This sector must be given public recognition and funding. I would ask your Council to give this matter due consideration.

Thank you.