

## Address given by Göran Persson on the role of the Council (25 April 2002)

**Caption:** In a speech delivered on 25 April 2002, the Swedish Prime Minister, Göran Persson, calls for the reform of the Council, attaching particular importance to the responsibilities of the Presidency, the General Affairs Council and the European Council.

**Source:** Speech by Prime Minister Göran Persson at the seminar "The future of the European Union and the role of the Council". [ON-LINE]. [Stockholm]: Regeringskansliet-Government Offices of Sweden, [24.06.2005]. Available on <http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/1159/a/4079>.

**Copyright:** (c) Regeringskansliet - Government Offices of Sweden

**URL:** [http://www.cvce.eu/obj/address\\_given\\_by\\_goran\\_persson\\_on\\_the\\_role\\_of\\_the\\_council\\_25\\_april\\_2002-en-4699e8a2-a3f9-4354-a99b-58b8fe2269e3.html](http://www.cvce.eu/obj/address_given_by_goran_persson_on_the_role_of_the_council_25_april_2002-en-4699e8a2-a3f9-4354-a99b-58b8fe2269e3.html)

**Publication date:** 05/09/2012

## Speech by Prime Minister Göran Persson at the seminar "The future of the European Union and the role of the Council" (25 April 2002)

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the 2004 Committee for arranging this seminar. It is part of an impressive plan of action to stimulate the Swedish debate on the future of Europe. I wish you all possible success in this important work.

I would also like to this opportunity to commend Javier Solana for his untiring efforts on behalf of the European Union. You come to this seminar directly from the Middle East. Over the two and a half years you have had your high office, you have, more than anyone else, made the European Union visible in world affairs. For this we are all grateful.

Let me also thank you as well as Olof for highly interesting contributions to this seminar, which I believe tie in rather nicely with what I am going to say.

\* \* \*

During Sweden's first presidency of the European Union, we tried to deliver an impartial, efficient and open leadership. Our foremost concern was to carry the whole of the common agenda forward.

There are some factors that were of special importance for us to achieve this.

The key priorities were clearly set out in the presidency work programme. I believe that many of you still remember our three "E's". We also made an effort to communicate them very early, and they got wide acceptance.

That we managed to follow through on them was just as important. Even though a few unexpected issues arose, such as the foot and mouth disease, they did not force us to change course.

I believe that our ability to deliver was mainly due to the fact that our organisation was "light touch".

My office did have the overall responsibility for co-ordination - but the daily operation was to a very high degree delegated to the individual chairmen in working groups, Coreper and the Council. These three levels constitute a chain of command around which work must be built in order to guarantee an efficient and coherent leadership of the EU.

\* \* \*

During our six months in the Chair we also made some experiences that are important also in the future for Sweden as a Member State of the Union.

First, you need to know what you want.

It is important to have a coherent work programme with clear priorities for our own EU-policy in order to achieve results in the EU. The Government presented such a national work programme for the first time now in February. It will be renewed every six months but has a planning horizon longer than that. This is a good tool for the future.

Second, build networks.

To increase our influence in the EU, networking with other Member States is needed – with new members

as well as old ones, with small states as well as big ones. One recent step in that direction is the meetings of the prime ministers of the three Nordic Member States before each meeting of the European Council.

Third, get involved early.

There is a need to influence the preparation of new proposals and to affect the shaping of decisions earlier. We need to set our goals earlier and network more extensively with the Commission, the Council Secretariat and the European Parliament.

Fourth, openness and transparency.

The Union needs to be more accountable, better understood and more legitimate. The Swedish presidency was an open presidency and public access to EU documents took a giant leap forward during our presidency. We now see a groundswell in most Member States in the right direction.

Five, the European Union can play a role in world affairs.

The Union is the single biggest donor of international aid. The enlarged Union will by far be the biggest marketplace in the world, standing next to the US as a key actor in international trade. We will soon have a European crisis management capability that is operational. We already have a common asylum and refugee policy. The view of the EU is requested!

During the Swedish presidency we managed to stay united on all foreign policy issues, including on the Middle East. For the first time ever EU made a common statement on Iraq in the UN Security Council. We met with the leaders of North and South Korea in support of the reconciliation process on the Korean Peninsula. And when it comes to the Western Balkans now everybody, including the US and Russia give EU the lead-role, something rather incredible just a couple of years ago.

These positive developments have to a large extent been possible thanks to the new instruments we have at our disposal. The most important “instrument” is probably the person sitting next to me, Javier Solana.

But we may need to improve further the way we deal with our common foreign and security policy.

To avoid being victims of circumstance, the external objectives of the Union and its organisation must be set in such a way that it encourages the formation of common positions and a coherent use of all the external policy levers of the Union.

All these matters should be brought in under one roof. There should be a Council for External Relations – headed by the Foreign Ministers -, which should encompass trade, development, migration, crisis management and “classical” foreign policy issues. This will be an important tool for ensuring that the Union will speak with one voice in external matters.

Maybe, one day in the future, we will be able to witness the ultimate sign that we are having a truly common foreign and security policy. That would occur if the European Union would occupy one common permanent seat in the UN Security Council

\* \* \*

Ladies and gentlemen,

The European Council has assumed an increased role in terms of strategic policy guidance of the Union. This is a positive development. But today EU Summits tend to be under-prepared and have overloaded agendas. A multitude of issues, large and small, some of which have not even been announced clearly in advance are slowing down our ability to act. The conclusions of the European Council are long documents, couched in language even experts will find difficult to understand.

One reason for this state of affairs is that the Foreign Ministers have difficulties shouldering their co-ordinating role. I do not say this as a criticism against the Foreign Ministers. They have been faced with an increasing burden of external affairs and have little time left to sort out unresolved issues of specialised ministers or to prepare the meetings of the European Council.

We need to change this state of affairs. I believe that the best solution would be to maintain a General Affairs Council as the co-ordinating body at Council level. But we need to make that a genuine General Affairs Council: a Council with responsibility to deal with the issues that includes more than one policy area – and with the preparation of the European Council as one of its chief tasks.

It should be up to each Member State to decide whom to send to such a Council: deputy prime ministers, foreign ministers or ministers for European affairs. The important thing is that people with a clear political mandate represent all Member States. They must have full powers.

The European Council itself has to be provided with some house rules - a “code of conduct” -of its own. The conclusions of the European Council must become shorter and more focused. Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder have suggested that the requirement of unanimity in all matters before the European Council also should be reconsidered. I am prepared to look also at that idea.

What do we do then about the six-month rotating presidency?

The benefit of the current system is that it provides for a clear command and control at any given time in the EU. The line from Council down to working group level is chaired by the same Member State. This is a great advantage, and any reform should try to safeguard this aspect. In addition, we should not underestimate the positive stimulating effect that a presidency has on a national administration. This was surely evident in our own case.

But there are drawbacks as well. The government in the chair is sometimes tempted to push own pet projects at the expense of Europe’s broader interests. And when it comes to representing the Union externally a particular problem occurs: countries outside the EU complain about having to deal with new sets of priorities and personnel every six months.

The EU needs to develop a more long-term agenda. We need a comprehensive work programme. A work programme that goes beyond the present six-month Presidency periods.

One could say that we already have one for the economic, social and environmental issues in the form of the Lisbon process. The multiyear programme for asylum, immigration and fight against crime from the Summit in Tampere in 1999 could also be mentioned. But this is not enough. It is too patchy. To ensure continuity, we need a work programme that covers all policy areas and is adjusted annually.

Such a programme could be worked out jointly by a group of incoming presidencies together with the Commission, and agreed by the European Council. Then it would be easier to have different nationalities chair the various council formations. Maybe leaving only the European Council and the General Affairs Council in the hands of the country in the Chair.

Much as I and my colleagues in the Government enjoyed our Presidency last year, I think we have to face the fact that Sweden will probably, at the most, have one more EU Presidency of the same kind. For me, personally, a future team presidency, where for example the three Nordic countries and the Baltic states would share the responsibilities for a year or so, would be interesting to discuss further.

\* \* \*

Ladies and gentlemen,

The European Union is a stronger international force than ever before. We are a family of values. We must continue to build on that unity.

The challenges for the Union are manifold and call for more co-operation in the EU, and more coherent action.

The union will be larger, and that will mean adaptation. But adaptation mainly based on the structures we have today.

The European Council is the body that can take the broad and overall decisions needed – and be held accountable by the citizens. It is the core of EU.

The necessary reform of the Council must be guided by the question of what we want to achieve. We need to be patient and thorough. We must allow an open and broad debate. Today's seminar is one small contribution to that discussion.

Thank you.