

Address given by Johannes Rau on a European Constitution (Strasbourg, 4 April 2001)

Caption: On 4 April 2001, Johannes Rau, President of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), gives an address to the European Parliament in which he calls for the adoption of a federalist-inspired Constitution in order to make the European Union more effective and closer to its citizens.

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Address by Mr Rau, President of the Federal Republic of Germany (4 April 2001)

Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, I should like to offer my sincere thanks, Madam President, for your invitation and the opportunity to present my thoughts on the future configuration of Europe to this esteemed House.

Europe is becoming an increasingly concrete, increasingly tangible concept to its citizens, because it directly affects them. In 271 days, the citizens of twelve European countries will have a single currency in their wallets. We can travel freely through Europe, from Nordkap to Gibraltar. But do we perceive ourselves as Europeans?

To my mind, it is, as a major European journalist, the Italian Luigi Barzini, once said: "...despite our incontestable diversity and differences, basically all men are built in the same mould..."

We have a rich stock of common traditions, to which Winston Churchill referred in his famous Zurich speech in September 1946. For him, the common European heritage consisted of the Christian faith and Christian ethics, culture, art, philosophy and science, from antiquity to modern times.

We have all seen quite specific examples of our common interests in Europe. Surely globalisation is forcing us, as Europeans, to realise that we must not let the diversity of our cultural wealth become the plaything of, or fall victim to, worldwide dumbing down by global media powers, that the challenge to our values by fundamentalists and ethnic cleansing in Europe calls for a common response on our part and that the market should not have free reign but should be harnessed for social and ecological purposes?

Today, we can see just how great an appeal the European Union has in numerous countries. There are clearly perfectly practical reasons for this and the European Union is, without doubt, becoming more and more useful to all its Member States. But it is much more than a merely functional community. Europe stands for a specific concept of human existence and human coexistence. That is what we are constantly striving for, to strike a balance between the freedom of the individual and his responsibility towards society and the community.

Even the greatest visionaries of the 50s could never have imagined the exact configuration of European unification or just how many areas it would encompass. The successes of the common market should encourage us to set ourselves new objectives. However, if we are to be perfectly honest, we must admit that, alongside a broad consensus among many of our citizens, there is also scepticism, mistrust or even total rejection of the European unification project.

I think it is important not to allow doubt and criticism to target individual measures and their impact. Most of us know how important it is to live in peace after centuries of enmity, how well we have pulled together to increase our prosperity, how many advantages the internal market offers our companies, how much better we can work together in Europe on research and that progress means being able to establish in another European country without any great difficulty or having more and more educational qualifications recognised throughout Europe.

What the people of Europe worry about is how the unfathomable unification process is organised and the minimal influence which they appear to have on it. Many of our citizens rightly ask who is driving the European unification train? What speed limit must it keep to? What traffic regulations apply to it? How and where are the points set? What coaches are being coupled to or removed from it? And where does the journey end?

These are not academic questions. They are the questions being asked by the sovereign power, i.e. the people, in every country in Europe. And there can be no doubt that all these questions must be decided by the sovereign power in each of our European democracies, i.e. by the people and only the people.

Now I sometimes hear it said that a democratic process in the traditional sense is no longer possible in

Europe because there is no single European nation. It is true that there is no European nation and no European public in the same way as there is in the individual Member States of the European Union. But that should not prevent us from strengthening the principles of democracy at European level.

(Applause)

Democracy, rightly understood, means quite simply that people who want to act together for a specific purpose create the rules and procedures needed in order to do so. This is in no way contradicted by the fact that, in all other cases, these people have quite different interests and want to be sure that these differences are safeguarded.

That is precisely what Europe is doing. We want to pursue certain common objectives and interests, while preserving the variety of European countries and nations which form the basis of the European Union and make it so special. And this will, and should not, change in the future.

So the question we need to answer is: how can we organise the European Union so that its citizens can make more sense of it? What must we do so that decisions taken by the European Union are more broadly justified at European level? At the end of the day, what should the organisational framework look like? And I am firmly convinced that the only answer is: we need a European constitution.

(Applause)

A European constitution must become the cornerstone, not the keystone. A European constitution should stipulate that Europe will not turn into a centralistic superstate and that we are building a "federation of nation states". I am well aware of the fact that the terms "constitution" and "federation" appear highly suspect to many people in Europe. But surely this is just a semantic argument? I am positive that we shall find it easier to agree on what we mean in substance than on the definitions. We need to discuss the content instead of wrangling over definitions.

(Applause)

A European constitution must be the outcome of a broad debate in every country. Sceptical and critical voices will be raised in the debate. There are many weighty objections which I take seriously, even though I personally take a different view. I should like to discuss some of these today and explain my vision of a European constitution and the road leading to it.

One frequent argument against a constitution is that every additional step in the unification process is yet another step towards a European "superstate" and towards the abolition of the nation states. But anyone who, like me, is in favour of a federation of nation states, wants exactly the opposite! If we want a European Union which is a federation of nation states, it is because it improves the democratic credentials of community action, while guaranteeing the nation states the powers which they want to and should retain. New powers can only then be transferred to Europe if all members of the federation so agree under a transparent and democratically controlled procedure.

Preserving what has been acquired, preventing what is undesirable and remaining receptive to what is new – that is the basis for a constitution for a federation of nation states and that is what I should like to talk about.

No one wants to sideline the nation states and their sovereignty – on the contrary: we shall need them – and all their differences – to guarantee the diversity of Europe for a long time to come. The implicit or explicit response to the idea of a federation of nation states is that Europe will, in fact, be predicated on the model of the Federal Republic of Germany. But if you take a closer look, you will see that the idea of a federation is justified for quite different reasons. The state structures in our European countries have evolved historically; in other words, they are different but equally valid democratic responses to specific historical developments. And it is precisely because Europe is not moving and should not move towards a centralised state that we need to find an arrangement which reflects this will, which safeguards our various traditions and which, at

the same time, is up to date. A federation meets all these requirements.