

Speech by Nicole Fontaine (Strasbourg, 14 December 1999)

Caption: On 14 December 1999 in Strasbourg, the new European Parliament building is opened in the presence of the President of the French Republic.

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Speech by Mrs Nicole FONTAINE, President of the European Parliament, at the Inauguration of the Louise WEISS Building, with M. Jacques CHIRAC, President of the French Republic (Strasbourg, 14 December 1999)

Mr President of the Republic,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you warmly to the European Parliament. You have agreed to inaugurate our new building in Strasbourg, thereby becoming the first European Union Head of State to speak in this new Chamber. This is only natural, since here in Strasbourg Parliament is France's guest.

Parliament is honoured by your presence, just as it was two years ago in Brussels when King Albert II of Belgium came to inaugurate the Espace Léopold.

Forty years after its inception, the European Parliament finally has its own home in this complex of buildings spread out harmoniously on either side of the confluence of two peaceful streams, like a symbol of Europe's determination to create dialogue and union against a background of peace.

Just as European integration is a collective process, contributions to this project, which was, during the construction period, the largest public-sector building site in France, have come from many sides.

First of all, I should like to draw attention to the strong support lent by the French State, the President of the Republic and the French Government, which provided a financial guarantee, and by the prefects of the region and the département, who represented the State, and to emphasise the close attention which you yourself, Mr President of the Republic, have paid to the development of the project and the completion of the work.

I should also like to pay tribute to the authorities of the City of Strasbourg and, in particular, its Mayor, Mr Roland Ries, and his predecessor, the Minister of Culture, our former colleague, Mrs Catherine Trautmann.

Your determination has been equalled only by the love you have for your very beautiful city and your determination to consolidate and raise its international profile.

I of course include in this tribute Mr Pierre Pflimlin,

(Applause)

the former Prime Minister of France, who was Mayor of Strasbourg for 24 years, and also President of our Assembly from 1984 to 1987. I salute him as one of the great driving forces behind European integration and offer him our deep respect and my affection.

(Applause)

Here, in Strasbourg, a European building site is intrinsically a matter for Alsace as a whole and I should like to stress the moral and financial support provided by the Alsace Regional Council and the Bas-Rhin General Council under the leadership of their presidents, the late Marcel Rudloff, Daniel Hoeffel, Adrien Zeller, also a former Parliament colleague, and Philippe Richter.

Naturally enough, our thanks also go out to all those directly involved in the design and building work, the developer, the architects and the thousands of engineers, technicians, workers and sub-contractors who worked so enthusiastically on the project.

Today, I have the feeling that the shortcomings and problems in connection with the functioning of this building which we quite rightly complained about in July and which have quickly been remedied are now essentially forgotten.

With Brussels, with Luxembourg, the European Parliament spreads its activities between three places of work. We accept this unusual arrangement as a legacy of history.

As regards Strasbourg, I would merely say that this place has a specific purpose, one imbued with the spirit and memory of Europe, which the Amsterdam Treaty has now set in stone.

It was Lord Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Minister of the United Kingdom, who, in 1949, almost exactly 50 years ago, was the first to suggest Strasbourg as a powerful symbol of a new Europe in which peace had been restored.

(Applause)

He urged, and I quote, that 'this great city, which has borne witness to the stupidity of the human race ... should become a symbol of the unity of Europe ... an ideal place in which to pursue this great project in an atmosphere of good faith, rather than domination'.

This building, which houses Parliament's Chamber, will henceforth bear the name of Louise Weiss. I am moved by the memory of this intrepid political journalist, who was born in 1893 and who, immediately after the end of the First World War, threw herself into the struggle for peace, European integration and women's suffrage.

Louise Weiss has remained the symbol of a visionary commitment to the cause of women and the cause of Europe, both of which are still highly topical. In 1979, after the first election of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, she was the oldest Member of our Assembly. Following the opening sitting which she chaired in that capacity, she had the joy of seeing Mrs Simone Veil, who is present here today, elected the first President of the European Parliament.

(Applause)

Today's inauguration comes at a time when the European Council in Helsinki has just taken the brave step of launching the process which will ultimately lead to the reunification of Europe as a whole within the Union, the reform of the institutions in line with that enlargement and the creation of an independent European defence organisation.

It will not be easy. However, the history of European integration, which now stretches back half a century, has consistently been marked by the efforts which have had to be made with a view to overcoming initial conflicts of interest or differences in outlook between our States and ensuring that the common interest would ultimately prevail in a spirit of solidarity. The problems which have arisen over the last few days between two of our States, however deep-seated they may be, and regardless of their human and economic implications, will not prove exceptions to this rule. I am convinced that they will succumb to this desire to reach a conclusion based on consensus.

This inauguration also comes at a time when Parliament can be said, without exaggeration, to have reached political maturity, not least as a result of the advances secured by means of the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties. It now enjoys full recognition both within the Union and beyond its borders. I am delighted to note the presence here today of the highest authorities of all the European institutions, and in particular the Council, of which the Presidency is currently held by Finland, and I welcome Prime Minister Lipponen,

(Applause)

and the European Commission, led by Mr Romano Prodi, and many ministers and representatives of the Parliaments of our Member States, not to mention the Council of Europe and its European Court of Human Rights, which remains our neighbour and was for so long our host.

The task must now be to make Parliament's democratic accountability commensurate with the new powers which the States and peoples of Europe have conferred on it. Let me assure you, as the people whose presence has lent this inauguration ceremony its full European dimension, that our institution is duly mindful of this task.

May today's ceremony, which you, Mr President of the Republic, have honoured by your presence, send out a message of unity to all the citizens of the European Union on the eve of the year 2000. Without further ado, I give you the floor.

(Loud applause)