

Speech given by Gaston Thorn (14 February 1984)

Caption: On 14 February 1984, Gaston Thorn, President of the Commission reaffirms the institution's support for the setting up of a future European Union.

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[...]

Admittedly, Mr. President, support for your political venture, identification with your ideals, does not mean that we can give our unqualified approval to each and every one of the provisions in your draft Treaty.

My colleague, Mr. Andriessen, and I did not fail last September in this very place to tell you, with the candour we owe the House, on which points the Commission's view differed from yours. And, for my own part, I share some of the regrets expressed today, particularly by Mr. Pfennig.

The work which produced today's draft Treaty from September's resolution took account of some of the Commission's observations, and there we can only applaud.

However, some of the reservations made by the Commission in September still stand. This is particularly true—let me quote this one example only—with regard to the provisions which, albeit for a limited period, allow Member States to block a decision by pleading a vital interest.

I am not going to reiterate all the considerations that I put to the House at length in September. But I must say again loud and clear that that any move on your part, even with built-in limitations and qualifications, to sanction the possibility of pleading vital interest to block decisions is to my mind an unwarranted concession to a pernicious practice that Parliament and Commission have both hitherto condemned.

That said, Mr. President, your Treaty is indisputably a good Treaty, a fine draft.

It is gratifying for the Commission to recognize in it the underlying principles and key elements of its 1975 report on European Union.

And it is pleasing for me to find my own philosophy reflected in it.

I think you were right to break with what has so often been called the "softly, softly" approach which consisted of expanding and enhancing Parliament's role without ever overstepping the institutional bounds imposed by the Treaties. It did indeed produce results in its time, but it has now clearly run out of steam. Though the Commission has always been ready to go along with any improvement in institutional relations compatible with the Treaties, it would seem that the Council is now unwilling or unable to commit itself further, in the absence of truly binding legal provisions.

And you were right too not enlist the assistance of the Member States in elaborating the small print of the Constitution of European Union but to press on and incorporate it yourselves in a draft Treaty in due and proper form.

In so doing you have shown that the debate between representatives of the people and between transnational political forces can be more fruitful than negotiations between representatives of governments. I believe this was essential.

You also got the timing right, since after some three years' work your draft is now ready just as the failure at Athens has removed any possible lingering doubts that Europe stands in need, in desperate need, of renewed ambition.

I must sadly admit that you have read the cards all too well.

Finally, you were right too to temper ambitious vision with realism and not to try to start from scratch.

I think that it is perfectly realistic today to think in terms of Parliament sharing the legislative power with the Council. A quarter of a century has already passed since the first moves were made towards integration, and

Parliament now commands full democratic legitimacy. And you have succeeded in democratizing the legislative process without blunting its edge.

It seems to me no less realistic to integrate political cooperation into the Union's institutional machinery. Similarly, it makes sense to limit the powers vested in the Union to those it can exercise more effectively than the States and to widen the exercise of those powers gradually in order to ensure a smooth changeover.

What the Community has achieved you have respected and even consolidated, especially—and this I must acknowledge and emphasize—with regard to the role of the Commission. By allowing it a prominent part in legislative initiative and by entrusting it with the stewardship of common action you have endorsed the political nature and irreplaceable function of the institution which makes a substantial contribution to the originality of the Community venture.

Let me speak as I find. Those who in the early stages of the election campaign are saying in the same breath that they want to relaunch Europe but with the Commission playing a purely technical and administrative role have not learned the lessons of contemporary history or of 25 years of Community experience, since all they really want is to turn the Community into an intergovernmental institution. To negate the political role conferred on the Commission by the Treaty is to negate the very nature of the Community...

Soon the election campaign will be in full swing and your draft Treaty will surely be its star attraction. And then it will be for the new Parliament to ensure that the Treaty is ratified by the States. That will be the moment of truth, when the uphill struggle begins in earnest.

You have thus embarked on an arduous fight for the future of Europe. I can assure you that the Commission will always be right behind you. We, in turn, are counting on your support in our struggle day-in day-out to keep our ailing Community alive and kicking.

A struggle, Mr. President, that is often unrewarding but, believe me, no less vital for that. The advent—soon, we hope—of a European Union based on a new Treaty must not be allowed to serve as a pretext or an excuse for failing to deal with the immediate issues, to face up to the here-and-now.

Our present Community must be resurrected straightaway if it is to live to keep the momentous appointment you are making for it today.

Our task here is twofold:

(i) we must adapt what we have already achieved, concentrating on reforming the common agricultural policy and restoring peace on the budgetary-front;

(ii) we must engage the Europe of the Treaties in a new phase of development, through enlargement, through the creation of a European economic and industrial area and through the provision of adequate resources.

But if progress is to be lasting rather than transient we must return to the paths of institutional orthodoxy and regain the ability, lacking today more than ever before, to take decisions and, above all, to take them in good time. The decision-making mechanism rusted over the years by the practice of unanimity must be made to work smoothly again...

So we have a dual struggle on our hands: to keep the Community alive and viable and to prepare for its conversion into a true European Union.

These are not conflicting tasks; nor are they separate. They are simply two sides of the same coin.

In that struggle, Mr. President, Parliament and the Commission, by the very roles in which they are cast and

by the interests which they represent, can only be natural allies.

For this House represents the people of Europe, and they—as all the opinion polls demonstrate— want integration, and quickly.

The Commission for its part is an institution independent of the Member States whose role it is to identify, interpret and make good the common interest.

I am therefore convinced, ladies and gentlemen, that a joint attempt to tackle the complementary tasks of our two institutions offers the best guarantee for the immediate future of Europe.

So let me wish you, and by the same token us, good cheer, a good fight and every success.