

## Speech by Romano Prodi to the Economic and Social Committee (28-29 November 2001)

**Caption:** Romano Prodi reviews the tasks carried out by the Economic and Social Committee so as to demonstrate the role that this institution is called upon to play in the context of reform of 'governance' in Europe. The ESC enables civil society to participate and engage in dialogue at European level and, as such, it plays a part in strengthening the Community method.

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## Speech by Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, to the Economic and Social Committee

Brussels, 28-29 November 2001

Mr President,

Members of the Committee,

The current political situation compels us to face up to the dramatic issues of the day: terrorism, which the European Union and the candidate countries have forcefully condemned, and the fight against it, which we must pursue to a successful conclusion, the dangers of the international situation post-11 September, the fears of our fellow citizens and the need to work towards a fairer world which rejects violence.

We regard this dramatic situation as placing us under a political and moral obligation to work better, to join forces to create a strong, democratic and united Europe.

You have a special role to play here. This role was reaffirmed in the Protocol of partnership between the Commission and the Committee which I had the honour of signing a few weeks ago, with your President. We should all bear in mind that this Protocol is closely linked with the idea of European governance and the proposals which the Commission unveiled on 25 July. The two in fact go hand in hand.

Europe's citizens are losing confidence in the institutions that govern them and becoming increasingly indifferent to them. This cannot go on. The problem, which affects all relations between citizens and their representatives, whatever the level of representation, requires us to rethink European governance, or the way our Union, the Member States, local and regional authorities and the social partners operate. It is essential that the European Union take the initiative: it must urgently look at ways of re-engaging with the public more closely and consider the future of European democracy.

This explains why promoting new forms of governance has been a strategic priority for this Commission since the very beginning of its term of office. And it is clear that the analysis of the problem cannot be confined to the European institutions, and even less to the Commission alone; it concerns all public and private authorities, even where these operate on a global level.

This is a priority which must be seen in the current political context, and particularly the debate on the future of the Union and enlargement.

For the Commission, the publication of the White Paper is only the first step, but one that has considerable importance in its own right:

Governance is also your concern, above all because the Economic and Social Committee is by its very nature a mediator between social partners and a bridge between organised civil society and the Union, as your own definition of the Committee suggests. For its part, organised civil society, defined in the White Paper along the lines of your proposal, engages in dialogue with the Commission either directly or via your Committee.

As regards the Laeken process, you organised a hearing of civil society on 19 July on the aims of the Union, possible ways of amending the Treaties, fundamental rights, the allocation of responsibilities and so on. The conclusions from this hearing resulted in a Resolution which you adopted back in September.

In connection with this you have had meetings with the presidents of the economic and social committees of the Member States. I warmly welcome these initiatives. I must congratulate you on these efforts and on your work in the joint committees in conjunction with the candidate countries. These are important for another reason, too. If good governance in the European Union in its present configuration calls for greater awareness of the burning issues, concerns and values in civil society, such awareness is even more necessary

in the candidate countries, our new partners in the European venture, if we are to ensure that integration is not merely a matter of political union but also offers new opportunities to the societies of these countries.

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The Economic and Social Committee has participated actively in the debate on the reform of European governance from the very beginning. You immediately established a close dialogue with the Commission departments responsible for framing this policy and, above all, on 25 April 2001 you adopted your excellent opinion on organised civil society and European governance, written by Ms Sigmund and Mr Rodriguez Garcia-Caro. At the same time you succeeded in modernising your own practice of governance, stepping up contacts with the organisations representing civil society and reforming your own working methods.

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The ideas voiced by your Committee are easily identifiable in the four main themes of the reform proposed by the White Paper. It is worth reviewing them briefly here.

- The first principle is better involvement.

In order to be involved you have to know what it is you are supposed to be involved in. It is the duty of all the institutions, as well as the Member States, actively to inform people about European issues. You can play a leading role here, and the political commitment we have entered into in our Protocol rightly includes ways of improving cooperation between our institutions.

Participation in itself requires a serious commitment to consultation on the part of the decision-makers and a greater sense of responsibility on the part of the sectors consulted. In other words, while the Commission has rightly undertaken to take more notice of your opinions, you are committed to making your specific requests clearer and stepping up your involvement in shaping the legislative proposals of the Union.

In the particular case of the Economic and Social Committee, consultation should take place both upstream and downstream.

By consultation upstream I mean not only the opinions produced in response to our proposals but also, and above all, your own-initiative opinions and more specifically the exploratory opinions which you have undertaken to produce and in which the Commission is placing high hopes. Opinions of this type can and should be enriched by your own hearings and public events. On a more general level, as you state in your opinion on governance, the Committee should deploy the full range of means at its disposal to participate effectively at all stages of consultation.

But the Committee also has a role to play downstream that is at least as important, namely in monitoring and assessing European regulations and programmes. This is particularly relevant in view of the professional experience of its members and represents an added value that is indispensable. The success of the Single Market Observatory set up by the Committee is a practical example of this type of contribution.

The themes of representativeness and accountability are particularly well developed in your opinion on governance, from which we have drawn inspiration.

Our societies are undergoing far-reaching changes. Involvement in associations, for example, provides ever more evidence of the potential for mobilisation and generosity among our citizens.

The Committee has rightly noted that civil society is becoming increasingly European: barriers between Community countries mean nothing to it; it takes for granted that Europe is the arena in which it must operate to change society; it expects to be consulted on all important issues, and it influences the media.

All of which raises an interesting challenge for both the Economic and Social Committee and the

Commission!

The Committee was also correct to point out that the legitimacy of the right to participation depends on the degree of representativeness, the competence and the organisational structure of those that speak for organised civil society. The White Paper tries to strike a balance between the quality of consultation and political accountability.

The Commission will set minimum standards for consultation and will conclude more detailed agreements with specific sectors, which will have to apply democratic principles in their internal affairs and ensure the representativeness of the associations consulted.

As you know, this subject provokes considerable debate in political circles.

We must undoubtedly preserve the prerogatives of representative democracy and political accountability, while at the same time allowing civil society to play its proper role at European level.

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- Improving Community policies, legislation and delivery is the second principle of the reform.

The White Paper's proposals on Community legislation draw heavily on the work of the Economic and Social Committee, particularly the Vever opinion entitled "Simplifying rules in the single market", adopted in October 2000.

The Commission is counting on a positive contribution from the Committee to its Action Plan for Better Regulation. Simplifying legislation should become a constant concern which we all share.

On the other hand, the Commission, like you, is very well aware of the role that civil society should play in the open method of coordination, which can usefully complement or reinforce the Community method.

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- The Union's contribution to global governance is the third principle of the reform.

Your work reflects a growing interest in the global dimension of the problems you are called upon to consider. One example that springs to mind is sustainable development - which was given pride of place in the conclusions of the Gothenburg European Council - to which the Committee recently turned its attention. This is a sign of the times.

You are also keeping pace with the preparations for enlargement, forging close links with organised civil society in each of the candidate countries, not least via the joint committees which have recently been set up and are already doing valuable work. This is extremely useful, because enlargement can only succeed if there is well-informed participation and a proper understanding of the Community ideal among the citizens and civil society of the future Member States.

There is also another aspect that concerns you directly: the growing presence of civil society at the major international summits, as we witnessed in Seattle, Gothenburg and Genoa.

Let me reaffirm here that while we utterly condemn the violence we cannot underestimate or ignore protests that are a symptom of real and widespread discontent. The profound dissent that lies at the root of the protests is articulated, sometimes unclearly, in a thousand different ways, but the enormous diversity of objectives only underlines the deep dissatisfaction with existing levels of justice and social participation.

But I do not want the demonstrators to misdirect their anger. As I said in Strasbourg, the European Union today is the only practical, effective and democratic response to the challenges of globalisation. As

intermediaries you can reconcile certain militant associations in the field of major world issues with the ideals and achievements of the European Communities.

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- The fourth and last theme of the White Paper proposals is the redefinition of policies and institutions.

This means in the first place that the Union must identify its own long-term objectives more clearly if the reform of existing common policies is to be effective. Any political decision must reflect the sometimes contradictory preoccupations of our society, for example the environment, consumers, employment, training or competition.

And the Economic and Social Committee has a part to play in this indispensable work of reform.

Secondly, each institution will have to focus on its essential tasks and thus restore vigour to the Community method.

This also means reorganising the way in which the three institutions, Council, Parliament and Commission, operate and cooperate amongst themselves.

It will be necessary to strengthen the Council's internal coordinating capacity and Parliament's supervisory powers. The Commission for its part will concentrate on its powers to initiate, implement and monitor policies and represent the Community at international level.

This is where you can help: in particular, the Committee's views on the thorny problem of "comitology" are reflected in our proposals: we need greater transparency and rationalisation if people are to understand more easily who does what at the executive level and, especially, where political responsibility ends and that of the expert begins.

Your institution, however, plays an important part in the formation of European legislation: recent studies seem to show that the proposals adopted by the Commission and the final texts adopted by the Council incorporate about two thirds of the proposals contained in your opinions. It is a *de facto* tribute to the relevance and quality of the work you do.

The primary role of the European Parliament and national parliaments is constantly to stimulate public debate. But your institution, with its many channels of communication, can help to combat the lack of understanding surrounding the European decision-making process.

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The Committee therefore has an important part to play in revitalising the Community method.

Your expanding remit seems to me to be in perfect accord with the creativity and the need for expression of today's society. Your consultative role is growing, intensifying and taking different forms. Events such as European Consumers Day result in an increasing number of associations taking an interest in your institution, attracted by the freedom of expression and the spontaneity that characterise it. And your responsibilities are also growing: in July 2002, when the coal and steel treaty expires, your institution will take the place of the ECSC Consultative Committee. For this process of transition you will be able to count on the full support of the Commission.

There is increasing evidence of the trust placed in the Committee and the high expectations we have of it. The most obviously political and important signal is the amendment agreed at Nice. In the amended text the members of the Committee are defined as "representatives of the various economic and social components of organised civil society" (including consumer associations); the Council will appoint them by qualified majority voting. This European recognition of your role as *intermediaries* is not only promising for the

future but is also essential for the present.

The White Paper itself is a starting point: it is now for each institution and each government to respond officially. The public can also have its say through the channels provided for in the White Paper.

The public debate has thus been launched and a number of possible actions have been put forward that can be achieved within a short time and are more detailed where the Commission alone is involved.

In this debate you will also be the echo of everything that is new in our societies and that helps to lend weight and efficacy to our democracies. On 8 and 9 November you discussed European governance and the White Paper proposals with the representatives of civil society. The Commission listened carefully to this debate.

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I cannot end without mentioning the Laeken summit which will take place in a couple of weeks. We must be aware of the political significance of the decisions it will take: these are choices about how to provide an appropriate constitutional framework for a Union that will be geographically enlarged and have greater powers to act. Whatever structures the European Council manages to agree upon, you will have to be involved as an essential intermediary brokering the forces at work in our society, either in the traditional form of trade unions and employers - the social partners who remain the hub of independent organisation in civil society - or in the new and diverse forms of association which we see developing in different areas. Your job is then to encourage and synthesise debate: a fundamental role indeed.

I wish you every success!