

Speech by Romano Prodi (Brussels, 20 September 2001)

Caption: On 20 September 2001, the European Commission and the Committee of the Regions signed a cooperation agreement. On this occasion, Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, underlines the importance of the local and regional dimension in the search for a European Union that is more democratic and closer to the concerns of its citizens.

Source: RAPID. The Press and Communication Service of the European Commission. [ON-LINE]. [Brussels]: European Commission, [27.05.2002]. SPEECH/01/398. Disponible sur http://europa.eu.int/rapid/start/cgi/guestfr.ksh?p_action.getfile=gf&doc=SPEECH/01/398|0|AGED&lg=EN&type=PDF.

Copyright: (c) European Union, 1995-2012

URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/speech_by_romano_prodi_brussels_20_september_2001-en-e4fbd168-bdd7-49c9-845e-3826a2bf6b08.html

Publication date: 25/10/2012

Speech by Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, to the Committee of the Regions

Brussels, 20 September 2001

Mr President,

Members of the Committee of the Regions,

On 25 July the Commission approved the White Paper on European Governance. I know that this document has long been awaited, especially by the institutions which are composed of elected representatives: I have already spoken about it in my address to the European Parliament on 4 September and have great pleasure in being here today in order to present the Paper to you officially.

Since the start of the project, the Committee of the Regions has expressed considerable interest in the idea: on 17 February 2000, for instance, you invited me to elaborate on the speech I had made to Parliament the week before concerning the five-year programme.

On 9 November 2000 you held a large conference on "new forms of governance in Europe" and at the plenary session on 13 and 14 December you unanimously approved an opinion on the same subject, on the initiative of Lord Tope.

Yours also was the original idea of holding an essay competition on the role of the regions and cities in the art of governing Europe; as the competition has just finished with the award of the prizes, I would like to take this opportunity of offering the winners my sincerest congratulations.

Throughout the different phases of preparing the White Paper, we have been able to rely on the active cooperation of European associations of regional, territorial and urban authorities, as well as on many local and regional political personalities. Both for the quality and for the extent of the assistance lent in the first six months of this year, I must thank every one of you.

A first response to the lack of communication and the public's loss of confidence

There is a problem that is common to all the European institutions and bodies: the lack of communication and the loss of confidence that have affected the European Union for the last ten years.

It is a problem that stems primarily from the growing need of European citizens to understand and be informed about how Europe works and how to participate more directly in the European project.

It is clear that the institutions have their share of responsibility, and we can and must rethink the system and attempt to give it a firmer democratic basis: in this respect there has recently been a wealth of projects, schemes and programmes, a welcome contribution to the vitality of the Union.

However, governance is not simply a question of devising the ideal institutional architecture. Everything does not boil down to "primary law" as, indeed, your opinion of December 2000 made clear.

We can and we must now make substantial improvements to the system in force without waiting for a formal although undoubtedly necessary review of the Treaties:

Is this not the best method of regaining credibility in the eyes of our citizens and of restoring confidence, in order to gain acceptance for the new measures?

That is why, with the White Paper, we intend to act straight away, using the Treaties as they stand, so as to recover the original spirit of the Community system and exploit the full potential of the Treaties.

There have been many important events since February 2000 and the background to the institutional choices has changed: there was the Intergovernmental Conference which ended with the Nice Treaty. "Nice" followed on from "Amsterdam", thus completing a cycle that started with the Maastricht Treaty and ends with the launch of a general and wide-ranging debate on the future of the Union, which must include a fresh appraisal of the nature and political objectives of a Union that is becoming continental.

A new Intergovernmental Conference has also been announced, one that is even more ambitious and that will among things examine the role of national Parliaments, the simplification of the Treaties and the definition of competences.

We had to take account of these important developments when drawing up the proposals and guidelines contained in the White Paper. Setting the horizon at 2004 meant reorienting the content of the document towards pragmatic and specific reforms that could be introduced almost immediately: once these have been achieved, we can set other goals.

Our strategy is divided into three phases, in parallel with the evolution of the debate itself:

- the publication of the White Paper launches the first phase, which starts the process of renovating the way our policies are managed and implemented at all levels. The changes will remain even after the basic Treaties are amended;
- in the second phase, the Commission will shortly be stating its position for the Laeken procedure, "on the basis of the principles already set out in the White Paper";
- in the third phase, the Commission will put forward the substantive changes to be made to the Treaties, drawing on the reactions to the White Paper.

Before analysing the aspects of the White Paper that more directly concern your Committee, I should like briefly to summarise its content.

The White Paper is based on five principles: openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. These principles effectively serve to "apply better the fundamental principles of subsidiarity and proportionality that underlie our Treaties", and they implicate all the institutions of the Union.

We wish to apply these five principles resolutely and efficiently, with due regard for the prerogatives of each institution and without waiting for - but without standing in the way of - a new legal framework.

To that end, we are pursuing the following objectives:

- increasing transparency in the everyday application of Union policies and participation by organised civil society and the representatives of municipalities, towns and regions;
- improving the quality, effectiveness and simplicity of legal instruments and the application of the laws of the Union, either through national, administrative and judicial channels or through the controlled setting-up of European regulatory agencies;
- reorienting the institutions according to their individual responsibilities;
- refocusing the institutions on their primary tasks.

Governance at three levels

I referred just now to the regional and local authorities and their involvement in preparing and implementing European policies. Their role as intermediaries is gaining in importance in our societies, and is set to grow in the larger European context, one that is gaining continental dimensions. Gone are the days when European

unification was the work of a small elite, engaging in technical discussions and negotiations for experts only.

Without in any way decrying the courage, tenacity and visionary abilities of that elite, which still inspires us today, our aim now is for grassroot involvement in the European Union as well and for full account to be taken of the different political levels at which Europe is being created.

Today, for instance, non-governmental actors from the private and public sectors and from associations are now linked at European level. And you who work in the field, who are closer to the public, form a direct link between Europe and local communities.

I believe, in short, that the White Paper reveals the faces of all those who are engaged on a daily basis in constructing Europe and who would like to play a greater part in its processes.

They include the leaders of regional, urban and local communities who have a special responsibility in that they are accountable for their actions to a parliament and for them Europe is an everyday reality. On the one hand, they are in the best position to promote grassroots democracy. On the other, they are directly involved in applying a whole series of Community rules and programmes.

Such "grassroots democracy" has much to teach the European Union in the way of improving communication and political practice. "Grassroots" is also included in the title of one of the working groups of your Institutional Affairs Commission, and was the subject of a major conference you held in Salamanca on 21 and 22 June this year, which resulted in your discussing an impressive draft report. This too is a significant contribution to the improvement of governance.

The Commission thus wishes to develop dialogue with the regional and territorial authorities.

Is it therefore our aim to bypass or ignore the national authorities in launching this innovative and revolutionary procedure?

Of course not, for obvious political and legal reasons: any action we take will comply fully with Member States' constitutional systems and will fall within the limits of the treaties which the Member States themselves wanted and which suit them; regional and local authorities operate within a national constitutional framework which varies from one country to another and which is respected by all Union institutions. This does not alter the fact that we have now embarked upon a system of interdependence between the local, regional and European levels where each needs the other.

That is why, although the central level remains essential, it is nevertheless being called into question quite independently of the initiatives of the Commission.

The national central level will only lose by ignoring or undervaluing the sub-national bodies, which are also involved in all the aspects of building Europe. They should play their full part both at national level, especially in the early stages of the national decision-making process, and at European level, for example by remaining in close contact with your Committee.

The role of regional and local authorities in European governance

I now come to the aspects of the reform which closely concern you and which indeed to a large extent reflect the opinion adopted by the Committee.

The first target is to ensure greater upstream participation in the European decision-making process, right from the conception stage.

This difficult but politically decisive task is primarily the responsibility of the Member States. They will have to involve their regional and territorial authorities, in accordance with their constitutional requirements, in the definition of national positions within Coreper and the Council. If it is properly managed, this process will help to prevent the sense of frustration currently pervading sub-national levels, especially in the

countries where they have legislative competence.

The procedures may vary considerably in form from one Member State to another, depending on their domestic legislation, but they are worth analysing and assessing.

I am convinced that the Committee of the Regions is the body best suited to the task of carrying out this critical inventory of intra-national consultations. That is why the Commission has drawn up this proposal, in the hope that it will meet with a favourable response from you and that the quality and outcome of your contribution will enable the Member States rapidly to introduce transparent and concrete improvements, subject to parliamentary control.

The Commission for its part wishes to improve the structure of the dialogue with regional, urban and local actors; this means taking account of the wide variety of associations in towns and regions throughout Europe and of all the consultation techniques available at the start of the twenty first century. In a year's time, with the help of your Committee, we shall be presenting concrete proposals to reinforce the dialogue with the European and national associations that represent regional and local authorities. The aim is benefit from their ability to "feel" the ground in time, so that together, Committee of the Regions and Commission, we can identify the places where action by the Union has a direct and important impact at the local level.

The next question is one of flexible implementation: advantage should be taken of areas where there is a small margin for manoeuvre in Community policies, naturally without prejudice to equal competitive conditions in a single market. This is one possible response to what are often seen as excessively inflexible regulations and directives.

The Commission also intends to explore the concept of "tripartite contracts" between the three levels of power: Union, Member State, regions or territorial authority. For some implementing provisions the sub-national body will be able to choose the most suitable implementing instruments under a contract defining the terms and methods of implementation and enforcement. Each Member State will be responsible for these tasks in accordance with their national rules. In the event of failure to observe contractual obligations, the basic implementing provisions will automatically apply. Environmental policy could constitute the pilot sector: the Commission will present proposals on this matter in 2002.

We can already see that following the 1998 and 1999 reform the Structural Funds involvement in these programmes is shared between the Commission, the Member States and the regions, under a system defined in Article 8 of the Regulation which is based on the concept of partnership.

However, giving some flexibility to the implementing provisions on a "per contract" or "per objective" basis is not the only way of satisfying the various territorial requirements: these ought to be identified at the start of the legislative process. So it is in this spirit, and perhaps somewhat anticipating the Protocol, which I shall shortly be signing, that the Commission's White Paper invites your Committee to draft an interim report on the conditions for implementing the directives in force which have the greatest territorial, regional or local impact.

Observations on the ground would without doubt give us an idea of possible methods of gaining maximum benefit from the directives and regulations in force in order to satisfy the many requirements expressed at national, regional and local levels.

We would also be able to take account of the differences in the resources available to the decentralised bodies, differences which will only widen with enlargement, and to concentrate on optimising the functions of control and assessment at central level.

I suggest that we reach agreement before the end of the year on the precise terms of reference of this "exploratory" phase. The Commission will then review the way in which Directives are implemented:

Lastly, there is a challenge that we must face collectively: the question of coherence, within a given

territory, between Community, national and regional development policies. Here too the Committee has an important part to play. We must integrate not only measures at different political levels but also the effects of the different policies - energy, transport, agriculture, environment, etc. - with a view to overcoming sectoral divisions.

I am thinking here of the second European Union report on cohesion and the approval in 1999 by the competent Ministers of the European Spatial Development Perspective; a third milestone towards this integrated approach is the strategy for sustainable development adopted in June in Göteborg.

Shall we one day be able to produce a real development programme for the Union as a whole, so that we can together administer a common geographic area in the interests of each citizen?

It must not be thought that the Commission wishes to impose new bureaucratic constraints or ties or that it is trying to run before it can walk; it simply wishes to ensure that, at European level, there is the same coherence between sectoral and territorial as there is within the Member States. As with the second report on cohesion, appropriate indicators will be set up to measure that coherence, in a process that will involve you directly.

A protocol that provides a solid basis for the white paper

Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should now like to turn to the new protocol on cooperation between the Committee of the Regions and the Commission: in a few moments President Chabert and I shall proceed to sign the joint Declaration. On 24 September I shall be signing a similar protocol with the Economic and Social Committee.

This text, drafted on the basis of the Nice meeting and in parallel with the White Paper, reflects the spirit of the latter and draws inspiration from the Committee's Opinion on governance. Whilst the White Paper foresees a more proactive role for the Committee, the Protocol gives it a more specific role, through own-initiative opinions and forecasts.

Compared with the White Paper, the Protocol deals more specifically with information and communication policy. The euro communication campaign is a perfect example of cooperation between the Commission and the Committee of the Regions. I hope that the smaller local entities will make the necessary effort to prepare for the changes connected with the euro.

The Commission undertakes to apply the provisions we are adopting today with determination and professionalism. As part of the plan to implement the White Paper, I shall ensure that the necessary resources are made available. It is certainly important that together we provide the public with good quality information, especially at the local level. Better publicity for your opinions will also enhance the democratic debate and European communication policy, which we are in the process of reviewing with a view to providing a better response to the needs of our citizens.

We also intend to make a major effort regarding training for regional and municipal officials in European matters: this is also a White Paper priority inasmuch as there is still a lack of knowledge about Community law and how decisions are made and enforced.

The more familiar local representatives and officials are with the Community rules and their operation, the more important will be the political role of regions and towns. Such skills will also serve them well in their contacts with the public. The cycle of seminars you organised is of considerable importance in this respect, as an example of the leading role played by your Committee in this area, an area in which you can count on our fullest support.

In the White Paper, taking the principles of governance as a basis, the Commission sketches out an institutional model for the European Union which, rather than just listing responsibilities, provides a clearer

picture of how they are distributed and how they relate to each other. Governance is exercised at several levels; the aim is not to set them against each other but rather to produce an overall picture of the main objectives of our Union. This is one of the subjects the Commission plans to discuss in the next phase of its examination of the future of the Union.

From this point of view, the Committee of the Regions - an institution that is set to grow in importance in the Union - will, I know, make a significant contribution to the improvement of governance in Europe.

Thank you.