

## Speech by Jacques Blanc (10 March 1994)

**Caption:** Enthusiastic speech by the first President of the Committee of the Regions, Jacques Blanc, delivered during its inaugural session, on 10 March 1994 in Brussels. Jacques Blanc displays pride in the creation of the first 'institution' to give a role to the local and regional authorities and places great hope in the Committee's task of giving real meaning to the 'Europe of the citizens'.

**Source:** Minutes of the inaugural session of the Committee of the Regions for the first four-year term of office (1994-1998), Meeting of 10 March 1994, DI/CdR 25/94 (Part 2) Appendix IV. Brussels: Committee of the Regions of the European Communities, 24.03.1994. 4 p.

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## Speech by Mr Blanc, Chairman of the Committee of the Regions, in Brussels on 10 March 1994

Madame Chairman, Mr Vice-Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me at this time to speak from the heart rather than making a major speech. I have not prepared a speech, having opted to spend the time preparing the work of the Committee of the Regions. I feel above all proud; this pride we must all share, for henceforth, ladies and gentlemen, we are responsible for ensuring the success in Europe of the first institution - and I'd like to stress the term "institution" - set up under the Treaty of Maastricht, which has given the regions and local authorities a role in Europe. This is a key stage in the life of the fledgling European Union.

Madame Chairman of the Economic and Social Committee allow me to thank you for attending this Session. I have already had the honour and pleasure of meeting you, while preparing this stage and I much appreciate the way in which I was welcomed. I also felt that for you, as for ourselves, there was no ambiguity; we respect one another. However, the Economic and Social Committee comprises socio-occupational representatives whose duties are different from ours, in our capacity as political, elected representatives. From the outset I have felt that there is no need for us to worry about you wanting to keep us under your supervision; on the contrary, I have felt that you were of the opinion that it was essential to plan the running of the Committee of the Regions independently, with its own budget and Secretary-General. This does not preclude the way we will try to proceed, an intermediary joint structure providing technical back-up for both. In this connection, I was strongly aware of your discerning analysis of the role, which we, the political, elected representatives could play, not in overshadowing the work of the Economic and Social Committee, but in responding fully to the expectations of the people and citizens of Europe.

We all are experiencing a certain pride, all the more since we are a diverse assembly, comprising public figures from a variety of backgrounds, ranging from small districts - I myself am mayor of a small district to medium-sized local authority areas and I have experience working in French "départements" - to regions - I am chairman of a region. Since the different countries of Europe have different types of organizations representing regions and local authority areas - this diversity is an asset; it reflects the wealth of our countries in Europe, respecting the role of regional and local authority bodies in the nation state. We believe that the State and regional local authority bodies can complement one another, and the latter can make an additional contribution to democracy. We should be proud, but we should also be aware of our responsibilities, which means that we should take into consideration our diversity, and make it a bonus. Let us demonstrate that we are capable of this, as we did when electing the Bureau. We have proved that we are capable of overcoming contradictions which could have created a stalemate between regions and local authority areas; we have demonstrated that we are capable, within our own structure, of achieving a vital geographical balance, where the Twelve and representatives of the delegations of these twelve countries feel that they have been fully recognized; we have proved on this platform that we are able to strike the necessary political balance.

I firmly believe this evening that these three areas of balance, i.e. local authority areas and regions, geographical balance and political balance, can provide the basis for effective work and the credibility of our Assembly. It is true that a variety of commentators will query whether we are able to secure our own credibility through the quality of our work, by concentrating on specific political objectives, and whether we are able to avoid the temptation which we will sometimes feel to go in all directions at once. It will be up to us to impose the necessary discipline which would give us real influence.

I shan't discuss now the developments of the Maastricht Treaty which itself stipulates that an institutional reform in 1996 could supplement what has been achieved to date. I shall say that it is up to us to transform our consultative role into genuine influence by the credibility of our work, by our ability to focus this work on specific, fundamental political points, by demonstrating that, in addition to what we have already achieved, we are really a vital link and necessary intermediaries between the leading organs of the Community and all Europe's citizens.

In each one of our countries, whatever way the Maastricht Treaty was approved, we have experienced difficult times, even for stalwart Europeans. We have seen that perhaps a gap is growing between Europe and its people; whatever the quality of its officials and leaders, a gap is opening up. I should like to pay tribute here not only to the President of the Council - I much appreciated the presence here yesterday of his representative, the Greek Minister for the Interior – but also to the Commission and particularly its President, Mr DELORS, and to the Parliament and its President, who spoke here yesterday thus testifying to his interest in our work. It is vital that we, the regional and local elected representatives, should bridge this gap between Europe and its citizens and that we be the standard-bearers of the new European aspirations.

It is true that sometimes it is necessary to keep technocracy on the rails. It is true that it is essential for the realities of everyday life to involve a certain number of decisions. Now, we ourselves, in our everyday lives and at different levels, face up to the responsibilities we have taken on; every day it is our job to concern ourselves with the life of our fellow citizens, training and education for young people, public health, the quality of our environment and land-use planning. We are in a position perhaps to flesh out this principle and requirement of economic and social cohesion. This is not a slogan or a theory. We know that our municipalities and regions contain many young and older people who are excluded from working life and find this exclusion painful.

We are traumatized by the situation of those job-seekers, whatever their age and who have reached a state of despair. We are sensitive to the need, expressed nowadays more than ever, to allow our fellow citizens to rediscover their own personal equilibrium thanks to the quality of their environment. I believe that at a time when spiritual values are perhaps more remote, there is an existential anguish in the minds of many men and women in Europe, and in the world as a whole, but that it is possible for these men and women to overcome this anguish: they need to find a quality of life vital to them in nature, in their towns and in their villages. We know how important it is to ensure improvements in the quality of life and to enjoy extensive communications networks. We also want subsidiarity to be defined because genuine arrangements must be found for implementing subsidiarity, since the men and women in our countries need to feel that decisions are being taken closer to them. They have two expectations: (i) they wish to remain close to their roots (ii) they also know that nothing can be achieved without the European dimension.

We live in a world of incredible hopes and, sadly, of dreadful catastrophes. However, in this world which is constantly on the move, everyone is well aware that without the ability to build up Europe, to give a more genuine, concrete and real content to the people's Europe, the whole structure could collapse on the slightest pretext. I believe that we, the Committee of the Regions can provide the muscle, flesh and the nerves for the skeleton provided by the Member States. Here I am using a fairly strong expression first used by Mr Jordi PUJOL. We have to be active at two levels. As partners of the Parliament and the Commission, we have to work hand in hand with the European Parliament; here I should like to take the opportunity to reaffirm our will to complement and not compete with the Parliament. We want to complement the European Parliament's action and we also want to provide support to the Commission allow me to say here on a personal level that I have had the opportunity to discover in the Commission and amongst European civil servants a wealth of good will and high-calibre staff. They are often blamed for wrongs for which they are not responsible and for not being able to take decisions. We also want to give our support to the Council of the European Union; I had occasion to recognize its role and importance when I was member of the Council of Agriculture 1977-1978.

Our aim is to bring the fruit of our everyday experience to bear on major political issues. But I should also ask you to be the permanent heralds of the European message. We are members of the Committee of the Regions not only because we are meeting here in Brussels – and in this context we should like to thank the Parliament for having accommodated us and to thank the ESC Chairman for the remarkable level of service which all ESC staff have provided us with. However, we are also, and above all, members of the Committee of the Regions in our countries, regions and districts.

It is therefore important that we should remember what Europe really is, and what it actually provides for all its peoples. Throughout our regions and municipalities, it must be made known that we are members of the Committee of the Regions and bearers of European hopes and aspirations. I have strong hopes - and I shall

do my best to ensure we succeed in maintaining the balances I referred to above - in our ability to stand firm and to focus our efforts; I hope that we will also succeed - and here I should like to thank the Press - in passing on the message more effectively, not only because it is the message of the Committee of the Regions, for which we are here today, but because it also must be the harbinger of the everyday Europe for the people of Europe.

As we approach the end of this century, if we want to prepare for the next millennium we must be aware of the need to revive the European spirit. Let us work towards success in this, and let us demonstrate in our work, that there is a solution to the problems experienced by the men and the women of our era. We must be able to create new prospects for them so that they can flourish in their personal and professional lives, and also within society. Let us create a new solidarity movement and give the European Union the real sense of a "Community". Thank you.