

Speech by Egon Klepsch (9 March 1994)

Caption: As President of the European Parliament, Egon Klepsch welcomes the Committee of the Regions to its inaugural sitting in the hemicycle in Brussels. In his speech he emphasises the importance of the Committee's establishment to the democratic development of the European Union, and congratulates those responsible for its creation: the representatives of regional and local authorities, the Assembly of European Regions, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, the Consultative Council of Local and Regional Authorities, the European Commission and the European Parliament.

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Speech by Egon Klepsch, President of the European Parliament, to the Committee of the Regions in Brussels on Wednesday 9 March 1994

Assembly Chamber, Espace Léopold

DRAFT TRANSLATION

Mr President of the Council,
Mr President of the Commission,
Madam Chairman of the Economic and Social Committee,
Esteemed members of this Committee,
Esteemed guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a very special honour for me, on behalf of the European Parliament, to welcome you, the representatives of the regions and municipalities of Europe as a new institution of the European Union.

I should like to congratulate Mr Bollendorf, who has presided over the early days of this new institution until today's inaugural session.

It gives me particular pleasure to be your host here today. We were of course delighted to accede to Mrs TIEMANN's request to make our assembly chamber available for the inaugural session of your Committee. However I hope, for your sake, that you will soon have your own assembly chamber.

The inauguration of your Committee is an important step for the democratic development of the European Union. The European Community was founded as a community of member states established by treaty. The introduction of direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979 gave the Community a democratic basis which has since been constantly strengthened. The Single European Act, the Treaty on European Union and the Council decisions based on these:

- considerably extended the powers of the Community,
- made the representation of the people more proportional,
- extended voting rights to EU citizens resident outside their home Member States and
- created a citizenship of the Union.

When you begin your work, Ladies and Gentlemen, you will be filling a gap. Your Committee, situated between the European and national level and at the same time representing its citizens, will make it possible in future for our people to make their voices heard formally and officially within the Union at all institutional levels of the democratic system. Your Committee will thus be contributing to the further democratization of the Union.

You will be taking on important tasks, entrusted to you by the Treaty. The Union Treaty specifically involves your Committee in the legislative process, in the areas of economic and social cohesion, education and vocational training, culture, health and trans-European networks. It also gives you the right to issue Opinions and be heard on all areas of Community policy.

Your Committee can bring our people closer together within the Union. Regions and municipalities will be involved in strengthening the European edifice, in furthering democracy, in promoting integration and solidarity between regions, and in raising the efficiency of structural policy measures.

The establishment of your Committee gives Community regional policy a new dimension, as it will no longer be restricted to economic support measures, but will have now an institutional basis.

This success is the fruit of the policy which you, the regional and local authorities, have pursued consistently and with great commitment, particularly since the 1970s, to secure recognition as the discussion partner of

the European bodies in political, cultural, social and economic matters.

The success of your efforts can also be measured by the Maastricht Treaty's rewording of Article 146 of the EC Treaty, defining the membership of the Council, in that it no longer requires the presence of the representative of the national government, but merely that of a representative of the Member State at ministerial level, empowered to take binding decisions on behalf of the government. This could also be a representative of regional government.

Thus the regions have the opportunity to participate directly in the Community's decision-making process, at least in those areas which are their exclusive preserve. This puts an end to the equation of Member State with central government.

I am sure that you will join with me in paying tribute to the two representative organizations which, despite some resistance, have succeeded in coordinating their efforts to achieve successes:

I am speaking of the Assembly of European Regions and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, whose Presidents, Jordi Pujol and Pasqual Maragall, I am happy to welcome here today.

In this connection I would also like to mention the Consultative Council of Local and Regional Authorities which was set up in 1988 by the European Commission on the initiative of the European Parliament, an initiative which, incidentally, had much higher ambitions. The experience of cooperation between regional and local authorities and the departments of the Commission could prove valuable, at least in the initial stages of the work of your Committee.

The relations which developed between this Consultative Council and the European Parliament were exemplary. This excellent cooperation played no small part in making the second joint conference of the European Parliament and the regions of the Community, held in Strasbourg in November 1991, a resounding success.

The initial strategy of the European Parliament was to recognize the regional - and, where appropriate, local - authorities as jointly responsible for economic and social development, and active participants in the actions and programmes co-financed from the Community's structural funds.

Then came the principle of partnership between the European Community, the Member States and the regional and local authorities in the drawing up, assessment, implementation and further development of the Community's structural measures. This principle was taken into account in the Community provisions adopted on 20 July 1993.

The Parliament has always stuck to the principle that the regional and local level should be involved in the Community's decision-making process.

A small step in this direction was taken on 18 July 1984 when the three institutions, in a joint statement on reform of the European Regional Development Fund, agreed that there should be closer relations between the Commission of the European Communities and the regional, or where appropriate local, authorities, with due regard to the national powers and provisions of Community law.

Subsequently, the Parliament, supported by the two joint conferences of the Parliament and the regions of the Community, held in 1984 and 1991, continued its efforts to secure the establishment of a Community body representative of local authorities, which was finally realized in the Maastricht Treaty of February 1992.

The European Parliament, in the exercise of its budgetary powers, also sought to obtain suitable budget structures for your Committee and the provision of the necessary financial instruments.

The financial structure of the Committee of the Regions is to be designed to ensure efficiency and

autonomy, in keeping with the provisions of the Treaty of Maastricht.

In order to enable the Committee of the Regions to function, the European Parliament wishes to create some budgetary scope in addition to the MECU 12 earmarked in the 1994 budget. This should make it possible to react, rapidly if need be, to new needs arising as a result of the establishment of new bodies in connection with the Maastricht Treaty. To this end, the European Parliament has urged the Council that a supplementary and amending budget be submitted as soon as possible. This will permit the step-by-step establishment of the structures and services of your Committee.

I can at all events assure you that the European Parliament, in its capacity as part of the budget authority, will ensure that the Committee of the Regions has at its disposal the annual funds needed for the performance of its tasks. In a declaration made during the second budget reading at the end of 1993 the Council followed this principle in stating that the necessary decision would be taken at the appropriate time to ensure that the Committee was able to function.

The Parliament's attention was not restricted to the institutional aspects.

Two specific areas of the Parliament's activities are, I feel, of importance for your authorities.

On the one hand the long struggle for constant increases in Community budgetary funding for regions, areas and population groups in difficulties: funds totalling ECU 141 billion, three times the amount of the Marshall Plan, will be made available over the period 1994-1999!

On the other hand, the Parliament has recently been grappling with the problems of cities, and more generally local authorities.

The Commission recently adopted a completely new Community urban policy initiative with a budget framework of some MECU 600 for cities confronted with ever more serious problems of every kind. This was at the express request of the Parliament, which will be studying the initiative in the next few days.

As far as the local authorities are concerned, our institution, on the initiative of its Committee on Regional Policy and in close cooperation with the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, will on 6-8 April be holding in this assembly chamber the first conference of the European Parliament and the local authorities of the Community. The conference will hold a wide-ranging debate on Local authorities for a European Union closer to its citizens and with more democracy and solidarity.

This subject will be looked at from all its angles, which will be the subject of separate reports and statements, in which all the representatives of the local authorities and MEPs will be involved.

So you can see, there have been and are an extraordinary number of common ideals, objectives and subjects for the regional and local representatives and the members of the European Parliament. On this basis I should like to propose a concrete "work contract". If we help make the Community more accessible to the citizen the weight of the "democratic components" of the Community's institutional system will be strengthened. Cooperation of this kind must be based on:

- the regular exchange of documents and information,
- frequent contact between Rapporteurs and specialized sections and bodies,
- the forwarding of COR Opinions to the Parliament before it adopts its Opinion.

A link structured in this way will be valuable in two ways. On the one hand the Parliament will benefit from the discussions, proposals and political support of the bodies which are closest to the citizen, and on the other hand your Committee will be able to make use of legislative powers, which are not yet generally recognized, but which our institution increasingly has at its disposal.

The priority areas for cooperation will be not only those referred to you for your Opinion, or areas in which

you issue Opinions on your own initiative, but rather, with a view to the revision of the Union Treaty in 1996, also the content of Union citizenship and the institutional recognition of the autonomy of regions and local areas.

Here I am making a specific offer of cooperation: in accordance with the joint declaration of the Parliament and Commission of 9 February 1994 on the 1994 annual legislative programme, I have made arrangements for the programme, the Parliament Resolution of 19 January 1994 and the Council Declaration to be forwarded to your Committee.

I dare to hope that this is the first formal act of the cooperation between our institutions which I have just alluded to and which I fervently desire.

Throughout my period of office I have always attached great importance to cooperation between European institutions. This also applies to the Committee of the Regions. This requires each of us to be willing to take responsibility. Only together can we achieve our goal - a united, peaceful, free and prosperous Europe.

Legislative activities, important as they are, can and must not cause us to forget that in a short while a political event will take place which is of paramount importance for the Union and thus for all of us: the European Parliament elections in June. With a view to this, a large-scale political campaign must be initiated:

- involving everyone at Community and national level: institutions, political parties, opinion formers, social partners, representatives of economic and social interest groups, and
- stressing the need for the greatest possible legitimization of the European Parliament and thus of the whole European Union.

This Union, which Austria, Finland and Sweden are to join, which represents an important new stage in the process of European integration, certainly has many shortcomings. But it is an example to the world of freedom, peace and mutual respect and solidarity between peoples.

This heritage is too valuable to be wasted or destroyed through ignorance, passivity or indifference!

Tragic events which are happening not far away remind us that nothing lasts for ever, that nobody is safe from a violent return to barbarism.

I turn particularly to you, the representatives of the local authorities of the Union, and call on you to work at every opportunity to increase citizens' awareness of, and participation in, the European Parliament elections in June, in order - and I repeat this - to confirm the democratic legitimacy of the European edifice and its institutions.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Jean Monnet: "Nothing has any value without people. Nothing lasts without institutions."

I hope that your work will be crowned with success.