

Address given by Nicole Fontaine at the Nice European Council (7 December 2000)

Caption: On 7 December 2000, Nicole Fontaine, President of the European Parliament, emphasises the political and institutional implications of the Nice European Council.

Source: EUROPARL - La présidente du Parlement européen - Discours. [EN LIGNE]. [Strasbourg]: Parlement européen, [13.10.2004]. Disponible sur http://www.europarl.eu.int/summits/nice-pres_en.htm.

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/address_given_by_nicole_fontaine_at_the_nice_european_council_7_december_2000-en-b5de1916-4636-47bb-a1b9-93d8b79883b2.html

Publication date: 05/09/2012

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President of the Republic, President in Office of the Council,
Heads of State and Government,
President of the Commission,
High Representative for the CFSP,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin my speech by paying a warm and heartfelt tribute to Portugal and France who have been the driving force behind this full year of reflection and negotiations which is set to culminate here in Nice in a few hours' time. In making that tribute, I am not forgetting the role played by Finland in launching the Intergovernmental Conference process.

Significant progress has already been achieved, and it is my fond hope that the final obstacles will be overcome and that, by means of your unanimous vote, the European Union will be able to send out to all its constituent States and peoples the messages of dynamism and clarity which they are looking to this historic summit to provide.

If the Nice Summit is to be a success, it must clear the way for an enlargement, which, because we have agreed to set aside certain differences of opinion between Member States in order to reform our institutions, thereby making them more effective and more democratic, proves beneficial to all concerned.

If the Nice Summit is to be a success, it must demonstrate to our fellow citizens that the Union is founded on values enshrined in a Charter which can be invoked by every man and every woman living on the territory of the European Union, a Charter which we signed earlier today.

The Nice Summit is the meeting at which decisions must be taken on the unresolved issues. In other words, it represents the moment of truth.

Turning precisely to the most sensitive issues dealt with at the Intergovernmental Conference, as a prelude to the proceedings of this summit of fundamental importance to the future of the Union I should simply like to outline Parliament's viewpoint, as spelt out once again only a few days ago in its plenary assembly.

Ultimately, the enlargement must be seen in a broader context, that of the reunification of the entire European family against a background of shared democratic, economic, social and cultural values. It was particularly moving, this morning, to feel how strong those shared values are.

Over a period of less than one year the political landscape in Europe has been rocked by upheavals in the Balkans, upheavals to which the recent Zagreb Summit bore witness. The whole of Europe is at peace, even if some areas of tension remain. Torn apart yesterday, still fragile today, these countries have embarked on a process of democratisation and are now looking towards membership of the Union. It is only right and proper that we should bear this in mind.

Parliament is strongly urging you to enshrine in our shared legal system the fundamental values on which the Union is founded. The proclamation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights will be a vital stage in this process. The Charter does not simply seek to protect citizens against possible abuses of power by the European institutions. It also seeks to protect States against reversions to earlier forms of behaviour irreconcilable with our key shared values. If we give the Charter legal force, we will show that these values are binding on every one of us, Member States and applicant countries alike, and that they are inviolable. With that aim in view, as you know Parliament would like the Member States to give the Charter the legal force which will guarantee its credibility and effectiveness at the very least by incorporating a reference to it in Article 6 of the Treaty and, immediately after Nice, by turning their attention to a preamble to a future Union Constitution. I can tell you that the Charter will be the law which governs the Assembly's work, and this was the idea I was seeking to put across when signing the Charter today.

By the same token, Parliament welcomes the fact that the Intergovernmental Conference is proposing that you should incorporate into the Treaty a mechanism designed to prevent any breaches of the democratic principles on which the Union is founded.

However, values and policies can only be safeguarded and implemented by effective institutions. This is what is at stake in institutional reform. The issues of the weighting of votes in the Council and the composition of the Commission, issues which the general public unfortunately finds difficult to grasp, are overshadowed by the key problem of national sovereignty. Admittedly, the pooling of certain areas of sovereignty is a process which is anything but straightforward, since it has a direct bearing on our individual national cultures and the way in which power is exercised at national and European level. Nevertheless, I urge you to have the courage to acknowledge a fact which I regard as fundamental, particularly in a Union with 30 or more Member States: a decision to retain the right of each Member State to veto proposals in any area other than the constitutional sphere will not stand the test of time, in other words it will yield to the pressure of practical imperatives and public expectation.

Taking only these topical examples, who can seriously claim that individual Member States are in a position to provide an effective response, one likely to allay the justified fears of our fellow citizens, to the havoc wreaked by mad cow disease or the damage caused by maritime and climatic disasters? The citizens of Europe have not only come to terms with this fact, they are also looking to Europe as an entity to shoulder its responsibilities. This is a new phenomenon, not a nine-day wonder. It reflects a growing awareness among the peoples of the Union.

Even today, our Union of Fifteen is suffering cruelly under the effects of the unanimity rule. What would happen, then, in a Union with 27 or even 28 Member States? It is vital, therefore, that the scope of qualified-majority voting should be broadened. Let me tell you that Parliament will not judge the outcome of the European Council in this connection solely in quantitative terms, but also, and above all, in qualitative terms. The areas which are still the subject of tense discussions are precisely those which will enable us to say whether or not the Nice European Council has created a dynamic of enhanced effectiveness and closer integration. In Parliament's view, qualified-majority voting is required in the areas of taxation, social and cohesion policy, commercial policy and asylum and visa policy. These areas not only have direct implications for the smooth functioning of an economic and monetary area. Just as importantly, the Union must also be an area of solidarity, an area in which citizens enjoy genuine, that is to say untrammelled, freedom of movement, something which is not the case at present. It must be an area which, in the eyes of the world, has laid down clear and detailed rules for dealing with people from other countries.

If some Member States are still reluctant to make this vital step, they should at least undertake to draw up a timetable for the automatic transition to qualified-majority voting spread over two, three or even four years following the entry into force of the Treaty of Nice. European public opinion would accept an explanation that the objective will eventually be achieved, but it will not tolerate the abandonment of that objective. We have made Europe a fit place for future generations to live in. Those generations will be increasingly unwilling to accept the disparities which are still evident, disparities completely unrelated to the specific national characteristics which represent the wealth of our States.

There is another issue which we regard as equally fundamental. It concerns exemplary democratic working methods at Union level. The Union has come a long way since the Treaty of Maastricht introduced the codecision procedure. In their role as legislators, the Union institutions draw on a dual legitimacy: that of the Council, as the representative of the Member States, and that of Parliament, as the direct representative of European citizens. The codecision procedure, which has proved its worth, is the ultimate expression of the balance between these two legitimacies. In Parliament's view, the obvious course of action is to extend its scope to cover all the areas in which qualified-majority voting will henceforth be the rule.

A further vital factor in the integration process is the role which will be entrusted to the President of the Commission in the context of the changes to the composition of that body. By strengthening the position of the President and the College of Commissioners as a whole, you will recognise his role as the driving force behind the integration process, a role which will be more decisive than ever in an enlarged Europe.

In order to ensure that the dynamic of integration has free rein in that enlarged Union, we recognise the need for enhanced cooperation arrangements, although we are perfectly well aware of the problems surrounding the way they should be initiated. If these arrangements are not to be hampered by a democratic deficit, you must acknowledge Parliament's right to give its assent prior to their implementation.

As you know, Parliament attaches great importance to the practical nature of Union policies and their profile, as a means of bringing the Union closer to its citizens.

By making decisive moves towards the establishment of a European food safety authority, we will provide our fellow citizens, who are currently at a loss to know what to do in the face of recent food scares, with at least some measure of reassurance.

Parliament hopes that by giving the social agenda practical substance, and by agreeing on a timetable for the entry into force of its six guidelines, the Nice Summit will confirm that this agenda does indeed reflect a 'firm ambition' and that the Union will recognise that social, economic and employment policies are closely linked and must contribute equally to a better quality of life for our fellow citizens in the social sphere.

By making a defence Europe a reality, with a very few exceptions the Member States have shown their determination to give Europe as an entity a major role on the international stage.

Finally, Parliament hopes in particular that the Nice European Council will leave no matters unresolved and will take determined steps to launch a process of reflection about the nature of the Union, a Union whose Community method should be based on the approach employed by the Convention which drew up the Charter, and whose key objectives should be the simplification of the Treaties, a review of the distribution of powers and responsibilities between the Community, the Member States and the regions, and a constitution for Europe, the foundation of which would be the Charter we are about to proclaim today. However, that process of reflection must go beyond the purely institutional aspects of the future of the Union.

Thank you.