

Address given by Romano Prodi on the conclusions of the Nice European Council (Strasbourg, 12 December 2000)

Caption: On 12 December 2000, Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, presents to the European Parliament the results achieved at the end of the Nice European Council of 7–9 December 2000.

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Speech by Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, at the European Parliament on the European Council of Nice (12 December 2000)

Madame President, Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A. The December 2000 Nice European Council will be remembered as particularly lengthy, and particularly complex. This was always likely, in the light of its agenda, and it indeed came to be.

Nice was the venue for positive decisions, some of them long-awaited:

- Solemn proclamation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, undoubtedly a seminal document in my view. I know there are some, including some in this House, who consider it too weak, but I would simply point out that it was drafted and conceived with deliberate care, with a view to making it a legal standard. Parliament and the Commission have already made it clear that they intend to apply the Charter in full.
- The original foundations of the European Company Statute were laid over thirty years ago. It is a legal instrument of obvious value, one which our economic operators had long pressed for, and one which was sorely lacking during the major company restructuring we have been through. There is now no longer anything to prevent us translating it into action rapidly.
- Endorsement of the strategy for enlargement which the Commission had proposed.
- Adoption of the social agenda, the fruit of productive effort with the Presidency.
- Strong support for the Commission's proposals on maritime safety and the establishment of a European Food Authority.

B. These are but a few of the issues which were put before the Heads of State and government. I would add one other issue, because it is a groundbreaking one which I can sense will be of considerable importance: discussion of the very way in which summits are organised. These events are involved and difficult to understand. They move from place to place. This European Council took the wise decision to move towards holding them in Brussels, something which will further reinforce the latter's status as the capital of Europe. In the wake of the summits which have already been scheduled, every other summit will be held in Brussels. Once the Union has reached 18 Member States, all summits will be held there. I believe this forthright initiative from Mr Chirac is one that should be welcomed.

Now I would like to move on to the Intergovernmental Conference and the Treaty of Nice. First, allow me to pay tribute to Michel Barnier for what he has achieved. In this he collaborated, as I did, but more than I did, with Parliament – more specifically with Giorgio Napolitano and his committee, with rapporteurs Mr Leinen and Mr Dimitrakopoulos, and of course with Mr Brok and Mr Tsatsos, whose commitment was exemplary. Finally, Madame President, I would like to praise the particularly striking clarity of your own speeches to the meetings of the Council.

You will remember, Madame President, that when I last addressed this House, just before the Summit, I said that we needed a treaty with added value. In particular, I promised to return to this House with a frank assessment of its success. Moreover, in your own address at the beginning of the Summit, you said that Parliament would judge the success of Nice not just in terms of quantity, but in terms of quality.

It will be a little while before we can fully and accurately gauge the steps forward brought by the Nice Summit, but we can probably already put forward a few observations.

1. The first relates to extending qualified majority voting. This is a quantitatively important move, because it has brought thirty or so new chapters under this umbrella. As a result, qualified majority voting will increasingly become the rule in the Council.

Qualitatively, the same cannot be said. Little or no progress was made on cohesion, tax regulation and social legislation, all sensitive areas in which the Conference came up against the intransigence of some Member States.

This is something which disappoints me, not just because of the short-term consequences, but because the attitude behind it shows a lack of openness and understanding. Anyone who sees Europe merely as a "clearing house" to approach when necessary and to stay away from when it does not suit them, or when they have already got a great deal from it, is not just making an error of historical analysis, but is cheating future generations.

These new generations have the right to expect a lot more from Europe.

This inward-looking backdrop of reciprocal failure to make concessions does offer some small progress on justice and home affairs, however.

It has to be said that most of this progress has been deferred till after 2004. This is not to belittle it. It does however mean that the speed of development of the major new policy area of legal matters and cross-border crime, which was adopted at Tampere, is now under threat. The Tampere "scoreboard" will begin to fall behind.

I hope that these delays will not be blamed on Parliament or on the Commission.

I would by contrast like to take the opportunity to thank President Chirac and Lionel Jospin for making it possible to end the main ambiguities affecting our commercial policy. A good balance was struck between the legitimate concerns surrounding issues like cultural diversity, on the one hand, and efficient powers for negotiating with our trading partners, on the other.

2. Another source of satisfaction is the result in the field of enhanced cooperation.

Ladies and gentlemen, I feel that what we have here is a tool that is vital for the enlarged Union, one that the Commission will make use of, while taking care to play its "guarantor" role, firstly to make it possible for countries that wish to work together more closely towards major new common goals to do so, and secondly to counter any risk of fragmentation that unregulated use of such cooperation might bring.

3. Finally, I would like to say three things on the subject of the institutions themselves.

Where the Commission is concerned, there has been far reaching change. The Commission will be able to grow to 26 members. After that, the necessary (and much hoped-for) alterations will be made. These changes have been accompanied by the launching of major reform in the way the Commission is organised. The President will be appointed by majority (not unanimous) vote. After the Commission vote, the President will have the power to dismiss Commissioners and will have a wide degree of discretion regarding the actual organisation of the Commission, for example, the assigning of portfolios and the appointment of vice-presidents.

Parliament's main gain is a statute for political parties at European level. The Commission defended – unfortunately with no success, but without discussion on the matter being closed – the shared concerns regarding protection of the Community's financial interests by proposing that a post of Prosecutor be set up. However, it is worrying that MEP numbers were used in essence to counterbalance the equilibria in the Council. Much greater attention will need to be devoted in the future to this and other related problems, moving from a defensive role to a more strongly pro-active one.

Lastly, it was the weighting of votes in the Council that gave rise to the most difficult discussion and decision. This was inevitable in the light of the approach that was taken, but the outcome was regrettable for two reasons:

firstly, because it made a qualified majority more difficult, and a blocking minority accordingly easier, where the goal should have been the opposite in an expanding Union;

secondly, because it has made decision-making even more complex, something that runs counter to the legibility and transparency for which the citizens have been calling. To meet our citizens' expectations, we had advocated a double majority as the only solution that was objective, comprehensible and widely supported by smaller and larger countries alike.

At this juncture I would like to pay particular tribute to Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, who fought to the very end for a more equitable presence for the candidate countries and to set the qualified majority threshold at a less unreasonable level - though one that is still too high. This saw Belgium confirm its historic role within the European Union.

Madame President, ladies and gentlemen,

We must recognise that the hard-won conclusion of the Nice Summit was an achievement in itself. It was a conclusion that had to be reached, and with the Presidency's efforts, we got there. There are no leftovers from Nice. The next step is to work realistically towards rapid ratification of the Treaty.

This will enable us to move forward with welcoming new members, in line with the Helsinki conclusions. We must forge ahead in that direction.

Ladies and gentlemen, I feel, as President Chirac remarked, that Nice was characterised by the efforts of many to defend their immediate interests, to the detriment of a long-term vision.

Nice does, however, include a declaration on the future of the Union, and this gives me some cause for optimism.

The Commission knows the importance of setting out and monitoring a more precise division of competences between the EU and the Member States, incorporating the Charter of Fundamental Rights into the Treaty, simplifying the layout of the Treaties and looking at the role of the institutions. It must involve the governments, parliaments and citizens of the current Member States and the candidate countries, in demonstration of the dynamism of a Europe which is still being built. There is great demand for such a discussion, because the experience of Nice shows that the current method of reviewing the Treaties is no longer a valid one. Like the Community structure itself, the process for producing institutional change is under stress, and needs to be changed.

The Commission will come up with proposals for improving this process, and I expect your participation and support.

Madame President, Honourable Members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the wake of my initial remarks, which I hope I managed to put to you objectively and with conviction, I would appeal to everyone to remember that the final aim of the Nice Summit was and remains the reunification of Europe.

The new Millennium has given us an unprecedented opportunity to bind together the countries of our continent into a wide area of peace, stability and greater economic potential.

Nice is one step in this direction.

As a step, it was shorter one than we had hoped to make, or indeed could have made.

But we are moving in the right direction, and I would therefore ask you to lend us your support.



Thank you.