

Address given by Jacques Santer to the European Parliament (Strasbourg, 11 June 1997)

Caption: On 11 June 1997, Jacques Santer, President of the European Commission, delivers an address to the European Parliament in which he sets out the implications of the Amsterdam European Council to be held on 16 and 17 June and outlines the work of the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) on the revision of the Treaty on European Union.

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Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, in less than a week's time, the Amsterdam European Council will have to overcome the final obstacles to the reform of the treaty. We shall then see whether the IGC has met its triple challenge: to narrow the gap between the European project and the citizens, find the resources to exist in the international arena and review the institutions in order to bring about enlargement in good conditions.

Four successive presidencies have worked on this project in turn. The time has come to conclude. Further waiting at best would change nothing and at worst would lead to a move backwards. The current text drafted by the Dutch Presidency is a point of balance and, I hope, a meeting-point too. I would have preferred more boldness here and there but I do gauge the difficulty of marrying ambition and realism and I think that the Dutch Presidency team has largely succeeded in meeting the challenge.

If I remain concerned today, it is because there are too many attempts to undo, at the last minute, such patiently completed work. I would like to tell all of those who, concerned at the gap between politics and ordinary people, are tempted to take a thousand precautions: 'Be daring! Because in Europe there are more people dissatisfied with our slowness than hostile to our progress towards integration'. I also call on the heads of State and Government to resist the temptation to take advantage of the final home sprint to settle, through protocols and various amendments, problems that are ill-suited to constitutional improvisations. I would rather expect them to take advantage of the final negotiations to constitute a coherent and ambitious institutional package.

It is on that score that the shape of a final solution is still vague, even though a good outcome is vital. I repeat what I have often said: an ill-prepared enlargement would turn into a nightmare what I think in reality is a historic chance for Europe.

(Applause)

Mr President, a few remarks about the key points of the negotiation and the 'Union for citizens'. The new treaty offers the chance to create a genuine area of freedom, security and justice. In this area, the accomplished work is remarkable and the text of this Presidency ambitious. The citizens expect no less, tired at seeing how the current system is deficient and that no convention – yes, no convention – has come into effect.

We can only welcome the broad communitarization envisaged for the third pillar. After a three-year transitional period, we should now switch to qualified majority voting and the Commission's exclusive right of initiative. But we should go to the conclusion of Community logic, i.e. introduce the codecision procedure.

(Applause)

As for criminal and police cooperation, it is legitimate at this stage to stay at intergovernmental level, provided that the effectiveness and democratic nature of that cooperation is increased. Integration into the treaty of the Schengen 'acquis' is a good thing. The share-out between the pillars must be clear if the Union's action is to be as coherent as possible in areas linked to the free movement of persons. Certain Member States have specific difficulties over this, I recognize. Let us find specific solutions for them, but not at the cost of blocking real progress as a whole.

It is now a fact that the treaty will include a chapter on employment. Of course, it cannot be expected that this measure would directly reduce unemployment – I shall come back to the broader problem of employment later – but this chapter is vital for at least two reasons. Firstly, because it shows that the endemic nature of unemployment has brought some of the concerns to the heart of the European project, along with the hopes of Europeans. Secondly, because the provisions included in that chapter are useful ones. Once our States have set as an aim a broad convergence of their economic policies, they also need a

coherent and coordinated employment strategy. For that we must set up consultative arrangements and the possibility to take incentive measures. That is what the Dutch Presidency's draft text proposes.

Integration of the social protocol into the treaty will make it possible to restore unity and coherence to social policy. But we must seize the opportunity offered to us to improve it and strengthen its provisions, or we shall run the risk of replacing an already difficult action for fourteen countries with an impossible one for fifteen.

We must also strengthen consumer health production to allay people's concerns. Unlike 1992, nobody now contests the Commission's proposals. They will rightly make it possible to involve the European Parliament fully in the adoption of measures aimed at by Article 129, extended to the veterinary and plant health areas.

(Applause)

We, i.e. the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission must then show that we can act in the interest of consumers, on the basis of the arrangements we have had made available.

Mr President, the second main aim of the IGC can be summed up in five words: existing in the international arena. There is a time to regret our collective powerlessness, but there is also a time to react and I should like Amsterdam to be the opportunity for a quantum leap in political will. First of all concerning CFSP proper.

The arrangements proposed by the Presidency are an important step forward. They provide for qualified majority voting for implementing strategic decisions taken at European Council level. The restrictive possibility of referring to national interest (in exceptional cases) – I prefer to speak of security interests, as it happens – is a price to pay for this advance. The new troika, comprising the Presidency, the Commission and the Secretary General of CFSP, is a promising tool in that it brings together all aspects of external policy and combines periodic renewal with continuity. In my view, it should play a coordinating role and act as an agent of coherence throughout the process, by relying on the analysis cell. I also welcome the agreement on the funding of CFSP. But apart from the instruments, we must also have genuine political will and use it effectively to develop a common policy.

One final word on CFSP, ladies and gentlemen, I do not see how Europe can claim to become a major actor without a military role. That means that it should set a deadline for integrating the WEU into the European Union, as six of the Member States have proposed in a joint position.

(Applause)

In modern life, the economic, financial and monetary factors are playing a growing role in external relations. It is clear that the arrival of the euro will change the situation and lead to a new balance of international financial and monetary relations. Commercially speaking, the Commission is asking for the adaptation of the treaty to current realities. It is a simple position of common sense, common sense that sometimes disappears in the diplomatic jousting and bureaucratic reactions. I say this clearly: refusing to make progress on services and intellectual property, the defence of the Union's interests, the Member States and companies run an acute risk of going backwards.

(Applause)

Everyone must take their responsibilities. The text proposed by the Dutch Presidency is a progress, since it provides for an extension, albeit limited, of Article 113 to services. But there are delegations which want to water it down or add to it, even in other articles, supplementary conditions, at the risk of emptying this progress of all substance, even ending up in a step backwards compared with the current situation. I shall oppose that.

I now come to the institutional questions, which are vital as they condition not only the support of

Europeans but also the future of the Union itself, just before its enlargement. The Presidency's text provides, as the Commission has always demanded, for a strengthening of the European Parliament's role as co-legislator. It is a sign of confidence that corresponds to the development of your institution. Only the European Parliament can ensure the democratic controls that the European Union needs at the stage of development that it has reached. We only need to recall the recommendations of the Karlsruhe Constitutional Court to realize that and the Presidency's approach is a real progress since it aims to cover most areas of a mostly legislative character. Furthermore, simplification of the codecision procedure, and the abolition of third reading, will put the two legislative branches on an equal footing. We should resist any last minute attempts to reverse that decision.

(Applause)

In that context, I think that the time has also come to define an electoral system that brings representatives closer to the voters and a European parliamentary status. I think that this is a vital factor for strengthening the legitimacy of the Community institutional system.

(Applause)

As for the functioning of the Council, the vital point is that of extending voting by qualified majority. The Presidency has dealt with this question with the necessary openness, which means inroads into the second and current thirds pillars and a consolidation in Community areas. A further effort could be made to foresee adoption of qualified majority voting on social provisions and some measures in taxation areas, but it has to be said that the Member States' attitudes leave little room for hope over that. It is a shame, because unanimity in a European Union of more than fifteen Member States will only lead to hold-ups and even paralysis.

As for the reweighting of votes, the Commission is open to alternative proposals by the Presidency, provided that the final solution does not make decision-taking more difficult and that it opens the way to more qualified majority voting.

I finally come to the membership of the Commission. The solution that will be found will probably be not that far removed from the one we proposed for preparing our institution for enlargement. The appointed President will have to be approved by the European Parliament. His or her role will be strengthened, I hope, especially over the appointment of the other Commissioners. As for the number, that has not yet been decided, I think. The Commission continues to believe that a maximum number of Commissioners should be set. As far as we are concerned, we are going to do what we announced for internal reforms and that includes the regrouping of tasks.

Mr President, allow me to conclude on the IGC. I told you at the outset that the draft treaty that we are debating today meets, on many points, the expectations set out by the Commission in its opinion of February 1996. Everyone will judge the final outcome by his or her own yardstick. It is the fruit of a lengthy labour. If we can improve it, let us do so, but let us not call into question the level of the project by making last-minute demands that would change the balance already struck. It is not easy to achieve a quality treaty with fifteen Member States. It will be even harder after enlargement.

Mr President, if there is a question that concerns all European, it is that of employment. The people of Europe expect the Union to offer answers to their main concern. The inclusion of an 'employment chapter' in the new treaty will help. But this is urgent. Why not anticipate the implementation of this arrangement? It is not tomorrow that we should learn from each other or work out a coordinated strategy on jobs. It is today. It is today that we must translate the best practices into recommendations.

In less than a year, we shall be taking the decision on the entry into the third stage of EMU. The setting up of a stable macro-economic framework has progressed a lot in recent times. Inflation and interest rates are at very low levels, and public deficits have considerably shrunk. At the Amsterdam summit, we shall have to complete the final preparations for the euro, the new exchange rate mechanism, the euro's legal status and

the stability and growth pact. The latter is important for guaranteeing sustainable growth. That growth must still be rich in jobs.

I welcome the fact that the ECOFIN Council, the day before yesterday, recognized the need for EMU to walk on two legs, monetary and economic. If the monetary aspect is clearly defined, we still need to make an effort to use all the potential of the procedures provided for in Article 103 of the Treaty and aimed at coordinating economic policies. An ambitious monetary policy only makes sense if it goes hand in hand with a policy for higher employment that everyone can understand.

(Applause)

I should once again like to emphasize that the stability pact, as its new name implies, is also a growth pact, therefore a job-creating pact. All the Member States wanted that. Without calling into question the stability pact's substance and arrangements, it is therefore perfectly possible to highlight employment still further and thereby overcome a concern expressed by one Member State at the latest ECOFIN Council. That concern is and always has been ours. I therefore very much hope that the contacts under way will make it possible to reach full success at Amsterdam, including an agreement on the stability and growth pact.

I also hope that the European Council will send a strong signal on the completion of the internal market by the end of the century. The potential of the internal market for competitiveness, growth and employment, is huge. The action plan proposed by the Commission defines four main areas for maximizing that potential: strengthening the effectiveness of the rules, ending distortions to competition or fiscal distortions, ending sectoral obstacles and putting the single market to the service of all citizens. Practical commitments will have to be made and clear deadlines set.

Reforming and modernizing labour markets is the third axis of a coherent and integrated strategy for jobs. The role of the social partners is especially important here. I therefore welcome the agreement signed at the end of the last social dialogue summit, last Friday in The Hague, on part-time work. This is an encouraging sign that shows that flexibility and the defence of workers' legitimate aspirations are far from being mutually exclusive.

The very positive reaction of the Member States, all the Member States, to the idea of territorial pacts for jobs is another reason for satisfaction. A new form of partnership is being forged on the ground and will be turned into a practicality by the launch of some 90 pacts, which will be hotbeds for job creation.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, the Amsterdam European Council will mark the future of the European Union. It will, I hope, be a historic meeting and proof of the desire of the fifteen Member States to advance towards unification, while respecting their different identities. A good agreement on the IGC will give Europe a new boost and enable it to meet the EMU deadlines and handle enlargement in good conditions. Let us not miss the opportunity.