

Address given by José Manuel Barroso to the European Parliament (Strasbourg, 26 October 2004)

Caption: In his address to the plenary sitting of the European Parliament held on 26 October 2004 in Strasbourg, José Manuel Barroso calls on the European Parliament to approve the new European Commission.

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Speech by José Manuel Barroso, President-designate of the European Commission to the European Parliament (Strasbourg, 26 October 2004)

European Parliament Plenary Session

Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have reached a decisive stage of the important democratic process that is the formation of the new Commission:

- In June, by unanimity, I was nominated as President-designate of the Commission by the Heads of State and Government;
- On 22 July I won the confidence of Parliament by a large majority;
- Since then, I have put together my team, in agreement with the Council, and on the basis of the nominations of the Member States;
- I have decided on the allocation of portfolios to the Commissioners-designate and on the internal organisation of the new Commission;
- During all that time, I have been in constant contact with this Parliament and I had the opportunity to meet all the Members of the European Council, with the exception of the Heads of Government of two countries where elections are taking place.

Today I have come to seek your approval for the new Commission. This is a team with many talents:

- It has more women than any previous Commission.
- It reflects a wide range of ideas, representing the major currents of European political opinion: Christian Democrats and Popular, Socialists and Social Democrats, Liberals and Democrats.
- It is composed of prominent figures with vast political experience at national and European level.

All of the members of the future Commission are ready to defend and promote the interests of our Union in a spirit of collegial accountability to Parliament. The principle of collective responsibility will be strictly applied within the Commission: as I told you in July, there will be no first and second-class Commissioners.

I can say that the Commission I am proposing to you has been generally received in a very positive way by the European public.

Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

All of the men and women in this Commission have attended hearings in the Parliamentary committees. This procedure, which has no parallel in the Member States, is an example of democracy in action at the heart of the European institutions.

Your hearings have revealed a broad consensus between Parliament and the future Commission. In the vast majority of cases Parliament's verdict has been positive. In a few cases Parliament has identified weaknesses and asked for a response from me. At the Conference of Presidents last week I gave my reactions to the letters from the Parliamentary committees. Today I wish to further explain my position on the most important points, without going into the details of the undertakings I have already given, and provide you with additional steps I am ready to take.

In a specific case of a potential conflict of interest, I gave the strongest possible guarantees that the Commission's work in the field of competition policy will not be affected. These guarantees are based on rules and procedures that are a matter of public record.

The Commission will always carry out its responsibilities in the area of competition impartially and independently and with assiduity and expertise.

Some doubts have been expressed about the mastery of the details of certain complex and technical portfolios, such as energy. I can assure you that I have absolute confidence in the political skills of the Commissioners-designate and their ability to absorb and defend their brief, however technical.

In the case of the criticism levelled against one Commissioner-designate, relating to her former political career, I would remind you that these concern allegations which can be dealt with under existing national control procedures, including judicial investigation. At this point no accusations have been made against this Commissioner-designate and she therefore retains my confidence.

Of course, I expect all members of the Commission to meet the highest ethical standards and to comply fully with the Code of Conduct. Let me say once again that I intend to use all the powers that the Treaty confers on me to ensure that this is the case. I will not hesitate to demand the resignation of any member of the Commission who is manifestly not up to the job or who fails in the duties imposed upon him or her by the Treaty. This also holds for cases brought up by the Parliament, which I will actively consider before taking a final decision. All the members of the Commission have undertaken to tender their resignation if I ask for it. Obviously, this also applies to any possibility of a reshuffling during the mandate of the next Commission. Once the Commission will be approved by this Parliament, I will have the power to make the adjustments I may deem necessary.

The verdict on Mr Buttiglione's performance at one of the hearings he attended was positive and at another hearing it was negative. Following this hearing I asked him for a clear explanation of his position. He replied in writing, expressing his regret and reaffirming his commitment to the principle of non-discrimination. I, for my part, would never accept anyone in my Commission who defends positions that are not compatible with the Charter of Fundamental Rights. I am sure that Mr Buttiglione will fully comply with the Treaty and the Charter and I can confirm that the rest of the Commissioners-designate share my view.

However, one good thing will have come out of this unfortunate incident: it has highlighted the importance we attach to decisive political action by the European Union in the fight against all forms of discrimination. For this I must thank Parliament. This debate enables us to transcend individual positions and move forward on the substance. An about substance, no doubts are allowed. For this Commission civil rights and an antidiscrimination approach will be top priorities.

I have already told the Conference of Presidents, and I confirm this today to you, that I intend to create a Group of Commissioners responsible for fundamental rights, anti-discrimination and equal opportunities. This Group, which I will chair, will monitor all Commission action and major initiatives in these areas. It will also act as a political driving force.

This group will not be a talking-shop. It will ensure the coherence of the action of the Commission in the promotion of fundamental rights and in the fight against all forms of discrimination.

It is my intention to set an ambitious agenda for this Group. I will be ready to discuss it with you and collect your suggestions.

Already now, I can announce you that I will make use of the results of a public consultation aiming at facilitating the creation of a European Fundamental Rights Agency, which will take as its starting point the current Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia in Vienna. I will await Parliament's contribution before presenting a legislative proposal on this matter.

I also intend to initiate work in view of a framework-directive on the basis of Article 13 of the EC Treaty, which will replace the directives adopted in 2000 and enlarge them to all forms of discrimination. Currently, these directives have a limited scope. With a framework-directive, the community action will cover all areas of discrimination and also discrimination founded inter alia on gender and sexual orientation. With this initiative, I am simply confirming in an even clearer way, what has been from the very beginning, one of the features of this Commission. Notably by its composition, with eight women within the College, this Commission affirms its determination vis-à-vis the challenge of non-discrimination.

Lastly, I intend to launch a programme and an action plan to combat discrimination, with particular reference to all forms of anti-semitism, racism and xenophobia. In this connection, the future Commission will commit itself to relaunching negotiations on a framework decision on racism and xenophobia, which has been blocked in the Council for far too long.

All of these initiatives, and other ones to be considered by the Group of Commissioners, will be prepared under my authority, and I am prepared to present them to you in person, when the time comes. Let me be very clear: I will personally ensure full control of our action in the fight against discrimination and the promotion of fundamental rights.

So, as you see, I have listened closely to Parliament's opinion; I have also taken into consideration your major concern and your objections and have provided substantive replies.

Some of you would have liked a more radical response and a reorganisation of the team. But is this a real option at this stage?

All the information I have, after careful consideration and extensive consultations, make me think that changing the portfolios at this stage of the procedure would cause more political and inter-institutional problems that it would solve. We should keep in mind that this process not only involves the President-designate and the Parliament but also the Council as a third and very relevant partner.

My team may not be considered perfect by all of you but is on the whole a very strong and balanced team, as recognised by many. I am convinced that we can do our job at the service of Europe, and under the political control of this Parliament.

It was a great honour for me to receive your support and confidence in July by a very large majority. I ask you now to support the solution I am proposing as the one that best serves the interests of the European Union at this point. And be free to judge the President and all the Members of the Commission later on the basis of facts and not only words.

Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last July I told you that my intention was to construct a "Partnership for Europe". A partnership for prosperity, solidarity and security. To do so, the new Commission will have to rise to major challenges facing us at home and abroad and live up to the expectations of Europe's citizens.

Fundamental institutional changes await us in the years to come, when the Constitution - as the Commission wishes - has been ratified by all the Member States and comes into force.

We must be ready for these changes; we must also see that the general public are given clear and objective information about the numerous benefits of this Constitution over the current Treaties. The Constitution will substantially boost democracy and effectiveness in the European Union and give the Union the right instruments to take effective action to meet the real needs and aspirations of the people.

It is, of course, primarily for the Member States to make the necessary ratifications in accordance with the procedures of their domestic legal orders. Nevertheless, the future Commission is ready and willing to work with the Council and Parliament to produce a common communication strategy.

The Union must focus its attention on growth; Europe needs more growth, more jobs, entrepreneurship, innovation, research. It must carry through the reforms that will ensure its economic dynamism. It must play the cards of education and training, knowledge and technological development to become a genuine knowledge-based economy that can compete in the ever-tougher international race.

These reforms, this spirit of constructive change, must fall within the context of a sustainable development

strategy that takes up the challenge of climate change and can offer an appropriate response to the issues of the day in matters of energy, transport and conservation of the environment.

To do that we will have to multiply our efforts not only at home but also abroad, pursuing a coordinated strategy in a multilateral setting. The Russian Federation's decision to ratify the Kyoto Protocol is a tangible success for the multilateral environment strategy that offers hope for the future.

But creating a more dynamic and more competitive Europe must go hand in hand with the maintenance of the European social model. I would add that only a more dynamic and more competitive Europe will be able to fully preserve this model. Let us not forget that in some of our countries we are still far short of a truly equitable level of social protection. Competitiveness, cohesion and solidarity must move forward in step. It is clear to me that cohesion policy and action to create a more competitive and dynamic economy are inseparable and complementary.

I am convinced that solidarity is an essential value that we dare not abandon without jeopardising the foundations of our societies. Solidarity between generations, between members and groups of our societies, between Member States and regions – this is not an abstract value. It is a wise choice that will secure social cohesion but demands both a political commitment and the proper financial resources.

Our European Union is not just an economic area; it is also a fully-fledged area of freedom, security and justice. The Commission that I am to preside will attach the highest importance to establishing common policies on asylum and immigration. Fair and balanced policies to promote the economic and social integration of third-country nationals in full respect for their cultural identities and the essential values of European society.

Cooperation with third countries is crucial here. I assure you that I stand against the setting up of “camps” outside the Union.

The Commission will co-operate more closely with third countries to help them tackle migratory flows. Partnership with third countries is possible only on the basis of a common commitment to respect the rules of international law. Let me be clear: the future Commission will work with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to set up international cooperation. It will insist that the third countries who are our partners sign and abide by the 1951 Geneva Convention on the status of refugees.

Likewise, this new Commission will continue to work to improve the security we all enjoy, while respecting civil liberties, in the face of the terrorist threat.

The Union must play its role on the international scene to the full; it bears major responsibilities and must be a strong and credible partner. It must continue to develop peace and stability and to reinforce the multilateral dimension in a wide range of matters.

We must strengthen our relations with third countries and regional organisations. Cooperation with the United States must be based on an equal-footing relationship and deep-seated mutual understanding. The election of a new President of the United States just as the new Commission is taking office gives us the opportunity to revive the transatlantic links. Regardless of the outcome of the election, I am convinced that the United States will be prepared to contribute to a more balanced relationship with Europe. If we wish that the United States follow a more multilateral approach we have from our side to show more unity and effectiveness in our action.

We will continue the process of enlargement of the Union to embrace the candidate countries. Also, our neighbourhood policy remains a priority, a powerful tool in the union's external relations, and it will enable us to build solid partnerships. I am convinced that enhanced political stability in Eastern Europe, in the Balkans and in the countries of the Mediterranean Sea will positively contribute to peace in our continent. Also, I am counting on our development aid policy to cooperate with those regions of the world that need our help and assistance.

Next January, I shall appear before you to present the Union's strategic priorities. This will concern not only the Commission's legislative and work programme for 2005. My aim is to attach a broader vision to strategic programming. In the spirit of the Constitution, I will present to you the priorities for the five years ahead. What I want to do is come to an agreement with Parliament and the Council on a long-term programme. In doing this, I shall be meeting one of the concerns expressed by this Parliament.

Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In July, I have told you of my desire to establish "positive complicity" between Parliament and the Commission. I am utterly convinced that the strength and credibility of the Commission lie in Parliament's support and in active cooperation between the two institutions. I have examined President Borrell's proposals on interinstitutional relations very carefully.

I await your resolution with interest and in my response I am prepared to take a line of maximum openness. I am in favour of transparency and co-operation between our two institutions.

I wish that once the new Commission has taken up office, negotiations start between the two institutions, with a view to making the necessary changes to the Framework Agreement. Europe needs productive cooperation between Parliament and the Commission, the two institutions that have always been at the fore in the European venture.

Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen

We are on the eve of an event of historic importance - the signing of the Constitutional Treaty on 29 October. This is not just a simple revision of the existing Treaties; it is the culmination of a long process involving Parliament, the Member States, the Commission, national parliaments and civil society, to make the Union more democratic, more transparent and more effective.

You, as representatives of the peoples of an enlarged Europe, know how much is expected by European citizens. You are also aware of the apathy and scepticism which affects European democracy. Like me you are alive to the populist threats of all those who are out to weaken Europe and will seek every opportunity to undermine the credibility of our institutions: we should not hand them fresh arguments.

We are living a crucial moment for our countries and for the Union. I have described to you the principles which governed the formation of my Commission. I have told you of my intention to work, over the next five years, for more prosperity, solidarity and security. You know what challenges lie ahead, both in terms of internal Union policies and international commitments.

We have no time to lose; now is the time to take action and work together for the well-being of European citizens. Let us devote our energy to promote growth, employment, the revitalisation of the Lisbon strategy, the rebuilding of a dynamic knowledge-based economy, greater cohesion in our enlarged Union.

This Commission is worthy of your confidence and deserves your support. I appeal to your sense of responsibility and your commitment to Europe and ask you to express your confidence in this College. On such a relation of mutual respect and confidence, together we can build a stronger Europe.