

Address given by Pat Cox at the extraordinary EU Summit for the opening of the IGC (Rome, 4 October 2003)

Caption: On 4 October 2003, at the extraordinary Summit for the opening of the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) in Rome, Pat Cox, President of the European Parliament, calls for the work of the Convention on the Future of Europe to be respected.

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Mr President,

I would like to thank you and your colleagues for inviting me to participate for the first time in the Intergovernmental Conference, and for the arrangements you have put in place enabling the Parliament to participate fully in the ongoing work.

My congratulations go first to you, and to your colleagues in the Italian Presidency, for convening the Intergovernmental Conference rapidly. You have put forward an ambitious timetable, in the hope of completing the work at the end of the year. We in the European Parliament fully support this objective.

Last week in Strasbourg, we voted by a 3:1 majority in favour of the convening of this Conference, and supporting the work of the Convention.

Let me quote what our resolution says:

"Notwithstanding certain limits and contradictions, the result of the Convention should be endorsed, representing as it does an historic step towards a European Union that is more democratic, efficient and transparent."

Of course, our Members did not find the detail of the draft perfect in every respect. On the contrary. We could so easily have produced a shopping list of demands. But we took a more mature and pragmatic view, and avoided the temptation. We felt that the Convention had examined seriously all the options, the hundreds of submissions from its members, the many ideas submitted to it from civil society. The Convention came up with a reasonable compromise which it approved with a broad consensus.

Two questions were uppermost in our minds:

Is the draft constitutional treaty on which this Conference will now work an improvement on the current treaty arrangements? The answer there is an unequivocal "Yes".

It reforms the Institutions, and makes them more efficient and, hence, better equipped to face the challenges of the wider Europe. It gives us new instruments to cope with the new opportunities and the new threats of the modern world. It provides the Union with an identity, with a clarity of purpose, and with transparent decision-making. It provides the best answer yet to the question: "Who does what in Europe?"

The second question we asked ourselves was: Is this a constitution for the future, or yet another stopgap until the next Intergovernmental Conference? No-one can pretend that any treaty adopted now will be the last word, but all our previous treaties have had built-in their own obsolescence, so the Union has become embroiled in permanent tinkering with its constitutional arrangements. It would be a wonderful achievement to move beyond endless institutional introspection. Why? Because, then, we could release and devote our energies to delivering on our essential public purpose; to improve the daily lives of our citizens. The Convention's draft gives us an opportunity to break out of this cycle, and to set the Union's course for the foreseeable future.

This is a defining moment for ourselves, between ourselves and European citizens, and between Europe and the wider world.

So, after much deliberation, we deliver you this appeal: respect the spirit of the Convention, and adhere to the substance of its results.

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Of course, the IGC should not discount any possibilities for improvement and clarification of the text. What I would argue against is embarking on a process of unravelling the delicate consensus achieved by President Giscard d'Estaing and his colleagues.

Just as our European parliamentarians in the Convention had to make compromises which may have disappointed the ambitions and thwarted the hopes of some of our more ambitious institutionalists, so I would hope that the Member States will continue this work in the same spirit of compromise that your own representatives - governmental and parliamentary - displayed in the Convention, on your behalf.

There are, of course, many future and prospective Member States around this table. If each and every one of you brings forward one or two items for change, an aggregation of all those differences would tear into the flesh of the Convention's work, and leave us with a skeleton.

Much will depend on the spirit of your work. I hope that through your work and your public comments on the issues at stake, our citizens will be able to recognise that all are addressing this subject in a constructive spirit and with a desire to succeed. And no partner in this dialogue must feel that he/she is being imposed upon, or that some groups of Member States are lining up against them. If the language is one of vital national interests being threatened, there are two risks. One is that, at the end of the day - or more probably in the middle of the night - we will return to the power politics of haggling, behind closed doors, which was exactly the scenario you sought to avoid in adopting the Convention method. Secondly, if the stakes are raised now on these issues, and the necessary compromises nonetheless reached, unrealistic expectations may have been raised, public opinion fears fanned, and the ratification process, once you have signed the treaty, made more difficult.

Let us raise our sights, with the ambition of a new and public way of doing business: *donc*, Convention-plus, *oui*; *Nice-bis*, *non*; and let us never forget the next stage - preparing public opinion for ratifying the new treaty in our 25 Member States.

The preparations that have been made for this Intergovernmental Conference have been different in quality and intensity from all others. The Convention brought together senior politicians from our governments, from our national parliaments, and from the European Parliament. They worked flat out on this project for 17 months. They did so in public. National parliaments have been involved in European construction more than at any stage in our history.

If we now go back to the drawing-board, some will consider the Convention's work to have been a sham; the national parliamentarians, who played such a vital role in the deliberations; informed public opinion, which was able to follow, step by step, every stage of the Convention's work, with unparalleled access to the highest quality debate on Europe's future. How would public opinion react if we were to undo the Convention's work, behind closed doors, and end up with a miserable lowest common denominator?

And just at the stage when Europe's vocation in world affairs has never been stronger, when the expectations of our partners never greater, how would our partner countries interpret a setback here? This is a chance to prove to ourselves, and to the wider world, our essential seriousness and preparedness to take a lead in world affairs.

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But, as I said earlier, there is certainly scope for improvements and clarifications which do not upset the basic balance within the Convention text. Our hope is that certain clarifications may underpin and complement the progress made. Let me give just three examples:

We welcome the changes proposed for the Presidency of the European Council, continuity of chairmanship, and the leading role in organising the work of Council in a Europe of 25 and more Member States.

But we must avoid confusion over the respective roles of European Council Presidency and Commission

Presidency. The reforms of the Council must not undermine the authority or collegiality of the Commission. For the European Council, we need a Chairman of the Board, not a Head of a new State.

Clarification would be useful on Council's internal structures and the new Council formations. We also need to address the question of the organisation of the preparatory bodies in Council. Not all of this needs to be laid down in the treaty, but we will need to have ready answers to the questions that will necessarily arise.

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I talked earlier of the spirit and the working methods of the Convention. Could I make some comments on the working methods of the IGC?

As I said earlier, this IGC has been better prepared than any other. The Presidency is surely right in wanting to ensure that all political matters are dealt with politically and at a political level, by ministers and heads of government who are accountable to their parliaments, and to public opinion.

The public debate on Europe's future should not be interrupted. Our citizens have been able to follow progress so far; they should retain access to this vital debate. I welcome the Italian Presidency's initiative to place all Conference documents immediately on the Internet.

The full engagement of national parliaments throughout is indispensable to the success of the process. I have just written to my colleagues, the Speakers of national parliaments, suggesting that our relevant committees organise joint meetings to monitor the progress of the IGC, and to evaluate its proceedings. Already four to five meetings are scheduled between now and mid-December. The participation of the President-in-Office at these meetings will be a valuable contribution.

If you have invited European Parliament representatives to participate here, and throughout the meetings at ministerial level, it is because you have recognised that our aim is not to participate as some kind of 26th Member State, but as a political partner, committed to the success of the Union and to the delivery of a constitutional treaty. It is your recognition that reform of the Union requires double legitimation, from the Member States, and from the peoples of the Member States. In the end, parliamentary involvement is indispensable for the ratification process. This is the spirit which Iñigo Mendez de Vigo, Klaus Hänsch and I will bring to the meetings.

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For myself, you know that, when an agreement is reached, and when we have a new treaty and a constitution for Europe, I will go out and campaign for such a treaty. Parliament will be a valuable ally in the ratification process, not least because this will be the focus for our next European elections. But to do that, we need a good constitutional treaty, based on the Convention's work, and we need to carry out our business in an open and positive manner. And we need to stick to the timetable.

The task we are undertaking is on a continental scale. With this vast panorama, we will not succeed in driving towards our common European future by constantly gazing at the rear-view mirror. We will only reach our goals if we keep to the spirit of compromise, and with the will to succeed.