

Address given by Romano Prodi at the opening of the IGC (Brussels, 14 February 2000)

Caption: On 14 February 2000, Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, delivers an address at the opening of the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) in Brussels on the reform of the institutions of the European Union.

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Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me just say how much we are expecting from this Conference you are about to open. The Commission has already put forward a detailed opinion on the main issues which are bound to come up. All I would like to do here is remind you of a few simple points:

1. First, the question before us is enlargement. The decision to embark on it is already taken, and the process is under way. And as it approaches, enlargement will concentrate our minds on the absolute need for institutional change which it implies.

2. Second, we must not think even for a moment that this is just the beginning of reform and that there will no doubt be other institutional reforms after this one. Look at the decisions on the enlargement process taken at Helsinki and look at the timetable before us. I see no room for a second IGC. We cannot countenance any leftovers from Nice.

3. Third, and following on from the previous points, our goal must be to make the institutions work effectively and democratically with 27 or 28 members. Much depends not on the Treaty, but on internal reforms. The Commission is firmly set on that course. Under the Helsinki conclusions the Council is committed to do the same.

4. But much will also depend on the conference which opens today. We shall embark on this process with ambition and also with modesty:

With ambition, because we must not have any illusions: we cannot expand from 15 to 28 members simply by patching things up. Decisive solutions must be found, otherwise the Union can only get weaker. For example, I genuinely believe that, with 28 members, any areas that are still decided by unanimity will be condemned to stagnation.

We must also be modest, as on certain issues we are still discovering the problems we face. I am not talking here about the number of Commissioners or votes in the Council, which were already discussed at length at Amsterdam, but a number of major issues on which I feel the debate is just beginning:

for example, the "closer cooperation" arrangements, which must be looked at again if a 28-member Union is to work;

the consolidation of the common foreign and security policy into a European security and defence policy to use the official terms;

or another challenge, which in some ways amounts to reforming reform: i.e. how do we stop the Treaty becoming fossilised after our Conference if we keep the requirement that amendments can be made only with the agreement of 28 governments, 28 national parliaments and referendums?

On all these points I can clearly see the problem and gauge the difficulties, but I cannot yet see a definite solution.

All I know is that it is our duty to think about these issues so that not only do we take in new members, but we take them into a Union which is strengthened by enlargement and not weakened by it.

5. Finally, we must think about the support we shall need from the people of Europe.

Let us be open and I would like to pay tribute here to the Presidency's plans for our working methods.

Let us tackle the issues head-on and the Commission (in particular Michel Barnier) will give its utmost.

But also, and perhaps most importantly, let us search systematically in our complex world for solutions that are simple and hence comprehensible.