

Speech by Hans-Gert Pöttering on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the European Parliament (Strasbourg, 12 March 2008)

Caption: On 12 March 2008, the President of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering, gives an address in the Hemicycle in Strasbourg to mark the 50th anniversary of the constituent meeting of the European Parliamentary Assembly.

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Speech by Hans-Gert Pöttering, President of the European Parliament, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the constituent sitting of the European Parliamentary Assembly (Strasbourg, 12 March 2008)

Colleagues,

Welcome to this formal sitting on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the constituent sitting of the European Parliamentary Assembly.

Firstly, please welcome all former Presidents here today:

Emilio Colombo, Lord Henry Plumb, Enrique Barón Crespo, Egon Klepsch, Klaus Hänsch, José Maria Gil Robles, Nicole Fontaine and Josep Borrell Fontelles.

Welcome!

(- sustained applause -)

A warm welcome to the President of the European Council, Janez Janša, and also to the President of the Commission, José Manuel Durão Barroso.

Mr Barroso, you are often in this chamber; today, you are especially welcome.

(- applause -)

I am particularly pleased to welcome the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Lluís Maria de Puig, in the chamber of the European Parliament. Welcome!

(- applause -)

I am pleased to welcome in the European Parliament the Presidents of the Parliaments of Belgium, Herman van Rompuy, and of Italy, Fausto Bertinotti, and of the Netherlands Senate, Yvonne Timmerman-Buck, together with representatives of the parliaments of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, the United Kingdom and Hungary.

(- applause -)

I welcome the Presidents of the other European Institutions:

for the European Court of Justice, the President of the First Chamber, Peter Jann,

for the European Court of Auditors, Viktor Caldeira, President,

For the European Economic and Social Committee, Dimitris Dimitriadis,

for the Committee of the Regions, Luc Van den Brande, and the Ombudsman, Nikoforos Diamandouros

Welcome to the European Parliament!

(- applause -)

I am please to welcome local and regional government representatives;

the Mayor of Strasbourg, Fabienne Keller,

the President of the Alsace Regional Council, Adrien Zeller,

the President of the Conseil Général du Bas-Rhin, Philippe Richert,

and the Prefect of the Alsace and Bas-Rhin region, Jean-Marc Rebière.

Welcome to the European Parliament!

(- applause -)

Colleagues, our fellow parliamentarian Astrid Lulling is sitting in seat 146. She is the only Member of the European Parliament who sat in the European Parliament when it was not directly elected.

(- sustained applause -)

Here in Strasbourg in what was the 'Maison de l'Europe', almost exactly 50 years ago, on 19 March 1958, the first meeting took place of the common Parliamentary Assembly of

- the European Economic Community,
- the European Atomic Energy Community and
- the European Coal and Steel Community,

consisting of 'representatives of the peoples of the States brought together in the Community', to quote from the Treaties of Rome (which had come into force a few weeks earlier).

We are commemorating this anniversary today because we are a continuation of the originally 142-Member-strong Parliamentary Assembly.

The first President of the European Parliamentary Assembly was the great Robert Schuman. In his inaugural address, he stated that the Assembly had an essential role to play in the development of a European spirit. And he said that, for that spirit, the Assembly was, and would remain, the crucible. That, I believe, holds true today. At the constituent sitting itself, however, he admonished his colleagues, stating that parliamentary work involving 142 Members, from six countries at the time, demanded discipline on the part of all, which today of course, now that there are 785 Members, from 27 countries, is all the more valid a point to make, as we all know.

Not long after the constituent sitting, our predecessors started informally calling their institution 'the European Parliament' - a term which did not appear in the Treaties establishing the European Communities. Four years later, in March 1962, the Assembly accordingly took the decision to call itself 'the European Parliament'.

Though the Treaties establishing the European Communities laid down that the Assembly had to 'draw up proposals for elections by direct universal suffrage in accordance with a uniform procedure in all Member States' and that the Council, acting unanimously, had to 'lay down the appropriate provisions, which it shall recommend to Member States for adoption in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements', it took until 1976 before the Council of Ministers, on the basis of a European Parliament recommendation, adopted a legislative act, on 20 September 1976, determining that there would be general and direct elections to the European Parliament.

Initially, the Parliamentary Assembly had virtually no prerogatives. Our predecessors suspected that they would have a long journey in front of them towards European 'parliamentarisation' which would demand of them, and of subsequent generations, a clear roadmap, courageous personal initiative and staying power. Step by step, the European Parliament has fought to secure more and more rights and has become ever more aware of its responsibility and of what it can do; and today, I think I may say so on behalf of everyone present, it does credit to its name:

- We are the representatives of close to 500 million Union citizens;
- we reflect all political tendencies in the European Union;
- we are the freely elected Parliament of the European Union, striving together to marshal the most convincing arguments;
- we have become self-assured and a power factor in European politics. Colleagues, we have every reason to be delighted about that.

The key stages on this journey, which began in 1958, have all been milestones on a shared path towards European unification: In 1971, the European Community was given its own budget, since when the European Parliament has played a leading role in the process of adopting it. In 1979, the first direct European Parliament elections took place. In 1986, the Single European Act finally enshrined the term 'European Parliament' in law. When the Treaty of Maastricht came into force, the European Parliament was first given, 15 years ago, a right of codecision on Community policy areas - and hence the possibility of significantly shaping draft laws and of stymieing them, if necessary, against the Council's wishes. The right of codecision was expanded further by the Treaty of Amsterdam. The Treaty of Lisbon will effectively make codecision the standard procedure for European legislation, appropriately making reference to the 'ordinary legislative procedure'.

Colleagues,

- Today, we are 785 Members from 27 European nations;

- we represent more than 150 national political parties, most of which have banded together within seven political groups;
- we are both a legislative and a budgetary authority, on an equal footing with the Council of Ministers;
- we exercise oversight over the European Commission and elect its President; and the Commission needs our confidence in order to take office;
- we advocate the primacy of Community law;
- we are the body representing the citizens of the European Union.

The Reform Treaty, the Treaty of Lisbon, which we endorsed three weeks ago, will further strengthen our rights. In future, decisions on important issues now of concern to citizens in the European Union can be taken only if the European Parliament gives its consent - and that also goes for the important justice and home affairs issues. All this is no reason to be self-satisfied; and it is most certainly not the outcome of a process which could be taken for granted. We fought for it.

I should like to thank the many colleagues who, led by our Presidents, over the last five decades, have committed themselves to strengthening parliamentarianism, as part of the European unification process, and have rendered outstanding service in so doing. I very much thank those members of yesteryear and the present.

Jean Monnet once said: 'Nothing is possible without people; nothing is durable without institutions.' Allow me to recall Paul-Henri Spaak, the first President of the Common Parliamentary Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the European Parliament's predecessor institution, who, through his report after the Messina Conference in June 1955, made a significant contribution to the groundwork for the Treaties of Rome.

The rationale behind parliamentary democracy in the European Union has been similar to that with which we are familiar from the history of Europe's nation states. The institutional balance which we have today created between the national and the European level represents a major achievement in terms of reconciling the various levels of collaborative governance within Europe. That balance also includes proper cooperation between the European Parliament and national parliaments, which is of particular concern to us. I am pleased that virtually all European Union Member State national parliaments are represented here today at very senior level. We - the Members of the European Parliament and national parliamentarians - must endeavour, in future, to maintain that cooperation.

The Treaty of Lisbon and the Charter of Fundamental Rights will make a decisive contribution towards making democracy and parliamentarianism in the European Union a reality at all levels. We can be proud of our consistent and unconditional support for the Reform Treaty and for the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Colleagues,

We need public opinion to be critical; our work needs to be viewed critically. But we are also entitled to fairness. The European Union, because of its diversity, is more complex than any other community in the world. I would ask the media, which we need in order to communicate with citizens, to make allowances for that. Above all, the European Union must not be misused as a scapegoat for national failure.

One of the greatest successes of our European vision over the 50 years has been the fact that democracy and freedom have been established throughout Europe. Membership of the EU for Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Romania, and re-united Germany, remains an achievement we dreamed of which has become a reality in our lifetimes. That gives cause for great rejoicing.

A review of the last 50 years involves, more than anything else, looking ahead into the future. We should be self-critical and remind ourselves what aspects of European parliamentarianism are still unsatisfactory:

- unlike national parliaments, we still cannot decide, as part of the budget procedure, to levy our own

financial resources;

- normally, rule by parliament goes hand in hand with parliamentary oversight over the armed forces; without a reasonable link between national and European spheres of responsibility, the European Union's common foreign, security and defence policy remains incomplete;
- we still have no common, uniform electoral law; accordingly, an important prerequisite is missing which would enable effective European parties to run on joint lists in European Parliament elections.

Since the first sitting of the European Parliamentary Assembly, the European Parliament has fought to secure its place - with patience, staying power and a clear roadmap. We shall continue in that fashion; we must. The European Parliament is a directly elected, supranational parliament and, as such, has become a model for similar efforts in other regions of the world; I notice it, as you do, when travelling internationally.

When, on 19 March 1958, Robert Schuman took office as the first President of the European Parliamentary Assembly, it was virtually impossible to anticipate such a positive development in parliamentarianism. But Robert Schuman had a vision. He talked of having to revive the notion of Europe - 'la relance de l'idée européenne'. What today, after the crises surrounding the failed Constitutional Treaty, could be a better watchword for the task before us?

In his brief address on 19 March 1958, Robert Schuman voiced concern that a technological approach could kill off European unification. That holds true today. Robert Schuman was realistic, and his was a modest and clear assessment of what the Parliamentary Assembly, of which he was President until 1960, could do, stating in his warm, friendly voice that: 'Nous désirons contribuer à créer un noyau de la structure européenne.'

Robert Schuman wound up his first address as President of the European Parliamentary Assembly with a declaration of belief in the unification of our continent, the unification of Europe, which, in his view, had to consider itself a community of values of the free peoples of the continent: 'Ainsi seulement l'Europe réussira à mettre en valeur le patrimoine total qui est commun à tous les pays libres.'

Allow me to continue in a similar vein. The European Union is a community of values. Our institutions are not an end in themselves; rather, they further our values - human dignity, human rights, democracy, the law, and economic and social well-being - and they further the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. Europe means mutual respect, respect for our diversity, respect for the dignity of all Member States, large and small. That respect cannot be decreed, but it is the prerequisite for us to understand each other and act together. Respect for European law, which enables us to reconcile interests and resolve conflicts peacefully, must be repeatedly complemented by the unwritten rule of European coexistence: mutual respect. Wherever we stand on the political spectrum, there must be mutual respect.

If we can achieve mutual respect - mutual tolerance while at the same time abiding by our own convictions, but we must be willing to compromise - the European Union and the European Parliament can be a model for peace in the world.

Our European legacy is reflected in the freedom and unity of our peoples, who have banded together in the European Union. We pay tribute to Robert Schuman and all Members of the first European Parliamentary Assembly in endeavouring to prove worthy successors to them through our work for a responsible and open European Parliament, close to the citizen, which must also be resolute in performing its task of providing political leadership. If we continue to strive to do this, we shall have no need to fear the judgment of our successors when in 2058, when the European Parliament is one hundred, they assess the work we are doing today.

Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour and a privilege to serve freedom, peace and the unity of Europe.

(- sustained and vigorous applause -)