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An "Avant-garde" driving the European unification process forward

Speech of Jacques Delors

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Before exploring the future, it might be useful to take a poised look at the current state of the Union. I will be brief:

- The decision-making and action-taking machinery is still operating, but its effectiveness, transparency and democratic accountability is becoming increasingly insufficient. The decisions taken at the European Summit in Nice do not seem to me to do much to remedy this worrying sense of drift.

- The beginnings of a "Defence Europe" are promising. For the time being, this means focusing on the creation of a rapid intervention force, so that Europeans can carry out humanitarian missions and peace-keeping or -maintenance actions either with or without the participation of the Americans. But there are still outstanding problems, especially in relation to NATO, and European countries will have to draw their own conclusions – including budgetary ones. They have managed to avoid the pitfalls of ideology and dogma. We now await the next steps.

- Although the results from Nice are disappointing in terms of making common institutions more relevant, they nevertheless pave the way for large-scale enlargement.

And from this point of view we can understand the satisfaction of the candidate countries, which I share with them.

That said, there are three fundamental questions that can help focus discussions over the next three years when Member States plan to review the institutional system in 2004.

1. What ultimate purpose can we reasonably assign to Greater Europe (first a 28-country Europe, and then with the Balkans and other candidates, extending to 33 or 35 countries)?

2. What are the appropriate methods for making Europe a success: which institutions, or even what constitution should we have, what place will there be for the charter of fundamental rights?

3. How can we combine enlargement with deepening? A classic yet fundamental question. Would it be useful to forge an "Avant-garde", or reinforced co-operation?

I. What ultimate purpose can we reasonably propose for a Greater Europe?

Enlargement is now in view, and it is our priority goal: a huge project, whose difficulties are sometimes exaggerated but often under-estimated. There is a list of thorny problems which I shall not rehearse here, but which largely deserves Günter Verheugen's comment: "the hardest part still remains to be done to get the current Member States to reach agreement."

Common sense suggests that the more members the Union has, the harder it will be to move towards the Founding Fathers' ambition of political integration. We must also set reasonable finalities for Greater Europe, slightly less ambitious than those proposed by the Single Act and the Maastricht Treaty.

I would personally suggest that Greater Europe should provide its members with a space for active peace, offering a framework for sustainable development, and a space for forceful values inherited from our different cultures and traditions.

Some will protest that such ambitions are too modest. But they are unaware of our experience over the last 50 years: the construction of Europe cannot be compared to a long slow river that gradually broadens its shallow bed. We have had periods of euphoria and expansion, of course, but we have also been through severe crises and periods of paralysis, due not only to classic conflicts of interest, but also to covert divergences about the ultimate goal of the whole adventure.

In such moments, many Europeans are tempted by wishful thinking or mere window dressing. Shock announcements keep on coming, but they never seem to translate into concrete achievements.

Greater Europe must first consolidate peace within its external borders. It takes time and money – and also the right method – to bring the situation back to normal in the Balkans, guarantee the rights of minorities, implement a balanced immigration policy, and fight against international crime. What is more, our duty is precisely to guarantee this peace through close co-operation with Russia and Ukraine, as well as with countries to the south of the Mediterranean.

We all agree that there is a long way to go in the next decade or two, and that the European Union will have to call on all that is best in its sense of solidarity and method to achieve this grand geopolitical community, reaching from the Atlantic to the Urals, and from Nordic countries to Central Africa. We have, for example, to think about the future of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, as well as about the future of the Lomé Convention. In other words, Europeans must feel responsible for peace throughout their territory, and among their neighbours in the broadest sense of the term. And, in a more global perspective, we must clarify and reinforce our Transatlantic relations, sort out our misunderstandings and develop in-depth co-operation with the USA and the Americas as a whole.

With respect to the purely economic dimension, there is much to maintain and much to invent. Do we always apply the three principles that underpin the 1987 treaty known as the Single Act - competition which stimulates (due to the single market), co-operation which reinforces, and solidarity that unites? This entails frank, open thinking about common policies and their resources and methods, ranging from direct intervention through financing and technical support to simple concertation through peer evaluation among Member States. I am personally in favour of this, having myself developed the philosophy and content of the Single Act.

In this respect, the next meeting for the finance agenda will be crucial. It should be debated right away along with the external dimension of the problem – the European Union is the world's leading donor for development aid and humanitarian action. Does it wish to remain so?

But a project for sustainable development goes even further. Is it our intention to accept the demands of economic growth that both respects the natural resources and meets the social needs? Candidate countries are scared off by the idea of trying to meet Union standards. And yet we have only just begun to think about and act to build a balanced, more secure world.

As our friends in candidate countries like to emphasise, are we sufficiently open to their contribution, are we ready to open a dialogue with other civilisations, and to share the effort at remembering our past? Or rather, in an attempt to force through European unification, will we end up by eliminating our precious differences, and our reasonable disagreements – those that do not ultimately prevent us from living and moving forward together.

To me, these are the exciting perspectives for those who wish to build the future.

II. Discourse on method

The facts are clear. The institutional system – or rather its practices – are running out of steam. They are too slow and too opaque, there is too much confusion about responsibilities, and not enough democratic control.

Naturally I am aware that all around us people are growing disenchanted with democracy, and first and foremost inside our own nations. Who can deny it? So we should not underestimate the difficulty. But we need time, plenty of time, to invent and set up an original democratic space for thirty or so

countries. Meanwhile, we should examine every formula that enables our citizens to participate in this extraordinary historic adventure – simplicity and transparency, with the participation of national parliaments and civil society.

The core of the problem lies in the way in which we broach the so-called ‘Community’ method. I am not being paradoxical when I say that as our numbers get higher, this is the only method capable of combining effectiveness, legibility and democratic control, especially in those areas covered but what I called the "reasonable purposes of Greater Europe".

There is not enough time to detail my position. I will simply say that the Commission’s place is at the heart of this arrangement, where its monopoly of initiative should be maintained.

The Commission launches key projects within the strict framework of the treaties, prepares decisions, informs public opinion about them, and selects the major options to be decided on, after scrupulously seeking concertation among the representatives of Member States. This would render the task of a 30-strong Council of Ministers easier, since it cannot afford the luxury of cumbersome, unproductive negotiations. The Commission also plays an essential role in ensuring respect for the rules of the game (competition policy), applying common standards (environment, social, food safety), and implementing common policies (agriculture, economic and social cohesion) and forms of co-operation (research and development, macro-economic convergence, etc.).

On this basis, the Council of Ministers could once again work properly, starting from the announcement of a project and going right through to the final decision. A renovated General Affairs Council meeting twice a month in Brussels could be responsible for the priorities agenda and for ensuring consistency, and would carefully prepare the European Council, where the aim would be to establish key orientations, not simply tick off a shopping list of desiderata, orientations, and decisions which will never be followed up.

As for the European Parliament, which is becoming increasingly and successfully involved as co-legislator, it too, in association with national parliaments, must bring Europe’s citizens closer together. They are still too remote or too caught up in the immediacy of affairs as relayed by the media.

III. The "Avant-garde" and its political project

Reconciling an enlarged Europe with a deeper form of Union is a real dilemma, and it will not be achieved with a few optimistic declarations.

First, to allay the fears of candidate countries, the concept of an "Avant-garde" should not be interpreted as élitist, condemning certain countries to remain forever at the rear of the European train. The idea of reinforced co-operation is not even new, even if it has recently been translated into legal idiom in the treaties of Amsterdam and Nice.

The spirit of reinforced co-operation existed in the facts once the Maastricht Treaty entered into force, with the ‘opting out’ obtained by the United Kingdom and the special derogation for Denmark.

Before 1991, the European Community coexisted with the European Economic Area, whose creation I suggested to the member countries of the EFTA. Some of which have since joined the Community. And also, Economic and Monetary Union among the twelve has been nothing less than a form of reinforced co-operation that dare not speak its name – and which as a result has no independent resources. That explains the weakness of the economic pillar vis à vis the monetary pillar. To implement EMU, we must have for the group of twelve more political and financial capacity in view of more economic convergence. In this area too the situation is not completely frozen since Greece has just joined the eleven countries that participated in the creation of EMU.

Put clearly, this means that reinforced co-operations, like the concept of an "Avant-garde", are structures open to anyone who wishes to and is able to join. I repeat: wishing to, but also being able to.

Candidate countries should make no mistake about this: a Europe without reinforced co-operation or an "Avant-garde" will inevitably dissipate its energies as the distance between planned objectives and the concrete potential to attain them grows larger. As Joschka Fischer has said, Europe needs a 'centre of gravity'.

It is therefore in everyone's interest to maintain, or rather re-establish, the right momentum, by enabling certain countries to explore the still-virgin land of co-operation in foreign policy, defence and even the optimum achievement of economic, ecological and social integration. Since reinforced co-operations have been rendered possible by the Nice Treaty, let us try them out. But I fear that if we have too many actions of reinforced co-operation, there will be enormous confusion about who is doing what and a lack of any guide or map showing us where we are going.

Which is why my preference goes to the reinforced co-operation as a single dynamic, and hence to an "Avant-garde" that will map out the way to European integration and drive the process forward. At the institutional level, this will take the form of a Federation of Nation-States, with a federal dimension to clarify competencies and responsibilities, and a national dimension to ensure the permanence and cohesion of our societies and nations. And it would, of course, provide the right vehicle for applying the welcome principle of subsidiarity.

The link with the Greater Union will be provided by a single commission, responsible for ensuring consistency between the two organisations and for respecting the rules and the *acquis communautaire*. The "Avant-garde", on the other hand, would have its own Council of Ministers and its own Parliament.

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Let us be realistic. Europe is also moving forward through the so-called 'intergovernmental' method. Proof of this can be found in the initiative for a European military rapid intervention force. And it comes from the choice – which I fought against – in the Maastricht Treaty of a Europe built on three pillars each deploying very different institutional methods.

But we need a framework of reference, of consistency and of innovation, which builds on the success of the past to provide the reasonable, yet constant determination to reinforce Europe, ensured that Europe can assume its own share of the responsibility for itself and for the world.