

Address by Jacques Delors

Presentation of the Treaties of Nijmegen Medal

15 March 2010

With this Medal, the City of Nijmegen establishes a link between the Peace of Nijmegen and the construction of Europe. It is a symbol of dialogue, tolerance and peace. We do well to remember the past. Our lives are dominated by the moment and our past and our heritage are remote. Let us look to the past to remind ourselves that we must not lose faith in man. We must have faith in his ability to be receptive to others and yet hold firm to his values.

During the long negotiations that led to the Treaties of Nijmegen, fighting continued. It influenced the course of the talks. Yet the delegates continued their dialogue, listened to their adversaries and acted in a spirit of tolerance.

That period was similar to the early years of European construction. The world was again in turmoil. There was the Cold War between East and West, the Korean War, the ill-advised British-French action in Suez.

This ceremony offers an opportunity to pay tribute to the protagonists of the two historic periods. We honour the victory of common wisdom over the instinct of domination – or to put it more simply, over the fear of others.

In our time, we strive with difficulty to live up to the ideal of the founding fathers. The question put to Europeans is this: Is the project still the same? Has the geopolitical context not changed fundamentally?

Should Europe build on its past, its heritage and its values to respond to the challenges of History? Or should Europe resign itself to a golden decline?

If we do not choose to accept a golden decline, if we decide instead to be active participants in a globalising world, then we must recover the political momentum that is now lacking. Is this what we want? Can we do it? Never have these questions been put to Europeans in such stark terms.

The importance of memory

First, we should recognise the importance of memory. Let me illustrate this by turning to the active role played by illustrious figures from the Netherlands.

Let us first remember the Hague Congress in 1948, an enthusiastic gathering of leading Europeans who shared a common dream: the unity of Europe. Their aspiration was “to end, forever, war amongst us”. Very quickly, there was disagreement about the political

and institutional framework. This disagreement is with us still today: federalists on one side and confederalists or unionists on the other.

But the process had been set in motion. A new European movement was created. Then came the European Cultural Centre. It was followed in turn by the College of Europe in Bruges, with your compatriot Hendrik Brugmans as its first rector.

The focus was on culture, on identity, on our heritage - on the character of Europe. Many people in the Netherlands worked to build Europe. I single out Henrik Brugmans because he epitomised its very essence.

Let me quote from his address in The Hague: "Europe is the land of men continually fighting against one another, the place where no certainty is accepted as truth, if it is not continually rediscovered. Other continents boast about their efficiency, but it is the European climate which makes life dangerous, adventurous, magnificent, tragic and thus worth living."

We see here the importance of memory: this statement speaks today to those who doubt Europe, who forget its wealth of experience and humanity and ignore what makes it distinctive.

The proposal made by Robert Schuman 9 May 1950 is equally high-minded. The spiritual value of this text is as impressive as its political value.

Post-war Europeans were plagued by tragic memories, bitterness and mistrust. They were now offered reconciliation, mutual recognition and tolerance. The words of the Jewish sociologist Hannah Arendt come to mind: pardon and promise. Pardon is not the same as forgetting. The promise was that the generations that came after the tragedies would be fully welcome in the human community. For the Dutch, who had suffered so much, and for the other European peoples, it was not easy to embark on this radically new phase in the History of Europe.

This was the start of a great move toward a united Europe. There were successes such as the European Coal and Steel Community; and there were setbacks such as the European Defence Community. And then came the idea of creating a common market. This touched off lengthy discussions and debate that resulted in agreement. The Dutch were very active in the vanguard of this movement, under the leadership of their two Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Joseph Luns and Willem Beyen. Beyen sketched out the features of a federal Europe in 1953:

“To reinforce the sense of European solidarity and unity, it is crucial that the concept of a common responsibility of European states for the common good be vested in an organisation designed to represent the general interest, with an executive body accountable not to national governments but to a supranational parliament.”

The bold approach taken by the Dutch and other founding fathers overcame sectoral disagreements and selfish interests. Ultimately, under the impetus of Paul Henri Spaak, a common vision was achieved and enshrined in the Treaty of Rome in 1957.

The Treaty contained everything, or virtually everything, that was needed: political will; the realism to start with the economy; and momentum generated by new institutions in which decisions and action could be taken efficiently and effectively.

This look back takes us to 1957. I will stop there. The early history gives us all the references we need today to rekindle the spirit of the pioneers. When we are troubled by doubt and beset by the contingencies of the present, we should remember the past and the essential questions. What threatens man, if not his refusal to understand and accept others? What threatens peace and tolerance, if not our illusory attempt to protect ourselves from the risks inherent in living together by withdrawing into local or national identity?

The project remains the same

In looking back over the past and the role played by the Netherlands, I believe I can safely say that the project remains the same. Are we prepared to recognise that fact? Are we prepared to act on it?

We must make the effort to adjust to economic upheaval, environmental challenge, globalisation and shifting values.

It is our political and intellectual duty to recognise these changes. But in doing so we must not abandon or weaken the European ideal. We have a moral and intellectual duty to reconcile permanence and change.

European construction was never smooth sailing. Europe experienced crises and always overcame them. It went through periods of stagnation. These coincided with periods of economic downturn or internal disagreement over issues such as financial contributions and the relative importance of economic, monetary and social issues.

Compromises were worked out. Some of these impeded progress in the construction of Europe. Some of us regret the concessions that were made, here and there, to the Eurosceptics and to selfish vested interests.

But the essentials of what has been built over the last 60 years remain. It is up to you, the new generations, to bring that heritage to fruition. In doing so, do not listen to those who tell you that the world is now radically different. Do not heed those who say it has changed for the better with globalisation of information and expanded trade, or for the worse with the politics of identity and racism.

Instead, focus on the fundamental questions:

Is Europe stronger as a union or is it not? Europeans now make up only 6% of the world's population compared to 15% a century ago.

Is Europe's core value, unity in diversity, still relevant, or is it not? Look around us. We see peoples aspiring to join the Union or come closer to it. They are not merely attracted by our prosperity, our standard of living and our consumer societies. They aspire to live in a society that embraces diversity as a way of living together.

These facts justify the successive enlargements of the EU. I need not belabor the successful Spanish and Portuguese accessions. I need not dwell on the inherently more difficult integration of the twelve nations to the east that joined the Union after emerging from the long night of totalitarianism. In welcoming them with open arms, the EU has shown its greatness. And we were able to discover the cultural heritage of these countries, similar to ours.

As President of the European Commission, I of course alerted Member States to the need to pursue enlargement and deepening in parallel. But my colleague Frans Andriessen and I were not heeded at the European Council meeting in Lisbon in 1992.

Further enlargements are now being prepared. They are a challenge for the Union. In considering them, our leaders must not condone distrust and systematic rejection as the easy way out.

I do not see the construction of Europe as an end in itself. From the start, in my view, the goal has been for Europe to shoulder responsibility in the world as it is - full of promise but above all threatened by those who, in the name of ideology or religion, refuse others the very right to exist.

We are waging a battle to uphold the unique value of each human being, freedom, tolerance and mutual understanding between individuals and peoples.

The need to revitalise the political momentum

We must admit that the new institutions created by the Lisbon Treaty have not yet proven themselves. The Union with 27 member states is difficult to steer. The financial crisis has compounded our difficulties and made Member States more cautious.

In short, the spirit of Europe's founding fathers is being eroded. There is a general sense of malaise.

Is the Union in danger? There are reasons to fear this. Attempts to reach compromise are hampered by increasingly dominant national agendas. The European Council attempts to gloss over these problems by announcing good news. But the good news unfortunately often proves to be untrue because it is based on false compromises rather than a real convergence of views.

We worry about Europe when we see the EU kept out of the final discussions in Copenhagen, and when we see governments adopt national measures to deal with the financial crisis, rather than agreeing on joint action that would prove less costly and more effective. There are many such examples.

Only when governments change their attitude, only when they are willing to look beyond their short-term interests and empower the EU to act, can political momentum be restored.

That said, I believe that part of the solution lies in improving the way the Union works. In other words, though it may be difficult for us to agree about what we should do, we should at least be able to improve the way we do it.

To this end we must return to the community method enshrined in the European Coal and Steel Community and the Common Market. A European Council sets the general policy orientations and its work is carefully prepared by the Council of Ministers and the European Commission. The co-legislative bodies, the Parliament and the Council, take decisions by adopting European laws. Above all, an institution, the Commission, strengthened by its right of initiative, “thinks every day of Europe”.

To some it may be a paradox, but for us it is self-evident: the greater the number of Member States, the more useful the community method and the more indispensable the work of the Commission. In this way, duly informed Member States are presented with well-prepared and streamlined proposals. They are given options and decide by a yes or no vote.

This is why we should be concerned when we hear talk of the European Council with its 27 members meeting once a month and becoming a kind of economic government. This would take us back to the days of the structurally ineffectual pre-war League of Nations that Jean Monnet warned against. If we are to learn the lessons of the past ten years, the task of balancing economic policy coordination and monetary policy must first be handled within the Economic and Monetary Union.

When the Single European Act was adopted in 1986, marking a milestone in the construction of Europe, I proposed the following words to capture the spirit of the Treaty:

competition to stimulate, cooperation to strengthen and solidarity to unite (through economic and social cohesion policies). Today what is most lacking is cooperation, or rather the spirit of cooperation.

To conclude I would like to return to the enlargement-deepening dilemma.

When the Union seemed at an impasse, the only way to get beyond stalemate was to accept to a differentiated approach. It allowed a limited number of countries to decide to move ahead in a given policy area, provided they complied with the E.U. rules.

This paved the way for progress, with the adoption of the Schengen Agreement on free movement of persons and the Maastricht Treaty on Economic and Monetary Union. I can assure you that if unanimity had been required, there would be no Schengen and no Euro today.

A differentiated integration process, along with a return to the community method, will help to restore the vital political momentum that Europe desperately needs today. This will make the options clearer to the citizens and leaders of Europe and enable them to decide on our objectives.

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It is fitting that I should speak these blunt words here, in this city, in one of Europe's founding countries, where so many leaders distinguished themselves in the inception and construction of Europe.

I do so in token of the faith I have in the people and leaders of the Netherlands and their ability to rekindle the European spirit and political momentum of our common endeavour.

In so doing, I also express my gratitude to the authorities of the city of Nijmegen for this recognition and for this opportunity to reaffirm, in these uncertain times, my faith in the future of Europe.