

**Conference of the Speakers of European Union Parliaments
Copenhagen, 29 June to 2 July 2006**

**Interparliamentary cooperation and the future of Europe
Joint parliamentary meeting on the future of Europe – outcome**

**Report by the President of the Austrian Nationalrat
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A) Interparliamentary activities during the Austrian EU Presidency

With the progressive integration of Europe, the work of the national parliaments is focusing increasingly on European issues. The challenges for the economy, environment, security and other areas can be dealt with at the national level today only to a limited extent. According to the subsidiarity principle, the European Union intervenes when political targets cannot be adequately achieved at the level of the Member States and are therefore better pursued at the EU level. In many areas in which the European Union is active, implementation nevertheless has to take place at the national level. But national parliaments also represent a link between the European citizens and EU institutions not only in a legal sense but also in a political one. The many thousands of national parliamentarians endeavour to represent the interests of their electors in all areas, including those with a European dimension. It is thus in the nature of the decades-long European integration process that national parliaments should be involved increasingly in EU affairs. The Austrian Parliament has taken account of this development during the Austrian Council Presidency, looking in particular at the discussion on the future of Europe and the future design of the subsidiarity and proportionality principle. A demanding working programme for 2006 was presented in collaboration with the Finnish Parliament back in autumn 2005.

The future of Europe has been the focus of a number of discussions: following the Treaty of Nice the European Parliament in particular called for a Convention that that would present a new, clearer and shorter “constitution”. The Convention was convened by the European Council and consisted of members of the European Parliament, parliamentarians from Member States and representatives of the heads of state and government. It was a body *sui generis*. The government conference of Member States made 88 minor changes to the results of this work, which has been ratified to date by 15 parliaments and approved in two

referendums but was then rejected in two further referendums. The Constitution has thus become blocked. The Austrian Presidency coincided with the period of reflection. Some people in the European Parliament wanted a second Convention with the involvement of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs as a working group chaired by the European Parliament with participation in addition by representatives of state parliaments. We rejected this concept in agreement with the Finnish and German Speakers; the state parliaments are “masters of the treaties” – our rules of procedure and constitutions have no provisions for joint decisions being made by a group in the European Parliament. This was also made clear at the start of the Austrian Presidency in a joint letter by the Speakers of the Austrian National Council, Finnish Parliament and German Bundestag to the President of the European Parliament, which stated that the national parliaments support cooperation with the European Parliament as equal partners, particularly focusing on the exchange of information and opinions. Because of the different legal frameworks, joint decision-making mechanisms are not possible and the cooperation must take account of the resources available to the national parliaments. Josep Borrell Fontelles, President of the European Parliament, endorsed this position and an outstanding six months of cooperation ensued with his full support.

The Austrian Parliament and the European Parliament worked in close cooperation to organise major interparliamentary meetings on the subjects of growth and employment (31 January and 1 February 2006) and the Future of Europe (8 and 9 May 2006), which were attended by hundreds of national parliamentarians and members of the European Parliament. The interparliamentary meeting on the future of Europe in particular, during which the Presidents of the European Council, European Commission and European Parliament made statements of principle on the future development of the Union on Europe Day (9 May), testified to the vitality of project Europe. Further interparliamentary conferences in this format are planned.

The application and design of the subsidiarity principle was the main topic of the conference “Europe starts at home”, which the Austrian Parliament organised on 18 and 19 April 2006 in St. Pölten in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Chancellery and the Lower Austria Provincial Government. The main agenda items at this conference were the role of the provinces and communities in Europe, the involvement of national parliaments in EU affairs and improved regulation at the EU level. Representatives of the national parliaments

and other participants were in general agreement that the national parliaments should be involved more in the subsidiarity review. Thus the Final Declaration by the Chair states: "On the basis of current EU law, the European Commission is also requested to forward its legislative proposals not only to the European institutions, but at the same time also to the national parliaments, and to review them if a representative number of national parliaments raise justified doubts as to their compatibility with the subsidiarity principle."

The subject of subsidiarity review by national parliaments was then addressed directly by the President of the European Commission José Manuel Durão Barroso. At the Conference on the Future of Europe on 8 and 9 May 2006, he assured the national parliamentarians that the Commission would in future transmit all new suggestions and consultation documents to the national parliaments and invite them to comment with a view to improving the political process. This proposal was then fixed in a communication by the Commission to the European Council. Subsidiarity and proportionality were also the main topics in the discussion at the Conference of European Committees (COSAC) on 22 and 23 May 2006 in the Austrian Parliament. At this meeting, COSAC welcomed the commitment by European Commission President Barroso and also asked the Commission to take into account comments by the national parliaments – particularly with regard to the subsidiarity and proportionality principle – and to respond to them accordingly.

At its meeting on 15 and 16 June 2006 in Brussels the European Council took account of these suggestions by the national parliaments. The conclusions by the Council state:

"In view of the importance of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, the European Council welcomes the initiative by the Austrian Presidency to hold a conference on subsidiarity in St. Pölten on 18/19 April 2006, as a follow-up to last year's conference in The Hague. The ideas developed at these conferences should be examined and future Presidencies are encouraged to carry this work forward.

The European Council notes the inter-dependence of the European and national legislative processes. It therefore welcomes the Commission's commitment to make all new proposals and consultation papers directly available to national parliaments, inviting them to react so as to improve the process of policy formulation. The Commission is asked to duly consider comments by national parliaments – in particular with regard to the subsidiarity and

proportionality principles. National parliaments are encouraged to strengthen cooperation within the framework of the Conference of European Affairs Committees (COSAC) when monitoring subsidiarity.

The European Council further recalls that the confidence of citizens in the European project can benefit from European legislation reflecting more strongly the added value of EU action. It therefore invites the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission to consistently check the correct application of the principles and guidelines laid down in the Protocol on subsidiarity and proportionality.”

The conferences of the Chairpersons of the various parliamentary committees have become something of a tradition. At the invitation of the Austrian Parliament conferences were organised in the first half of 2006 for the Chairpersons of the foreign affairs committees (27-28 March 2006), the home affairs committees (10 April 2006), the finance committees (29 May 2006) and the environment committees (16 June 2006). They were attended by the members of the Austrian Federal Government as representatives of the EU Council Presidency and in some cases by representatives of the European Commission. Conferences will be organised during the Finnish Presidency in the second half of 2006 in Helsinki for the Chairpersons of the foreign affairs committees (28-29 September 2006), the defence committees (20 October 2006), the agriculture committees (12-13 October 2006) and the equal rights committees (31 October – 1 November 2006).

The Austrian Parliament also hosted the 61st Transatlantic Dialogue with Members of the US House of Representatives and the European Parliament on 18 to 20 April 2006. From 25 to 28 May 2006 it organised a parliamentary conference in Cape Town in collaboration with AWEPA (European Parliamentarians for Africa) to promote European-African parliamentary partnership as part of the new EU strategy for Africa.

B) Joint Parliamentary Meeting on the Future of Europe, Brussels, 8 and 9 May 2006

An interparliamentary meeting on the Future of Europe organised by the Austrian Parliament and the European Parliament took place in Brussels on 8 and 9 May 2006. It provided a platform for an exchange of views and discussion by members of parliament of the 25 EU Member States and candidate countries and members of the European Parliament on questions of public interest relating to the future of Europe.

The discussion in the four working groups focused on “Globalisation and the European economic and social model”, “The European Union in the world and the borders of the Union”, “Prospects of the area of freedom, security and justice” and “The future financial resources of the Union”.

The meeting was attended by over 140 members of the national parliaments and some 70 members of the European Parliament. It was chaired by Josep Borrell, President of the European Parliament, Andreas Khol, President of the National Council, and Sissy Roth-Halvax, President of the Federal Council.

During the Conference, Josep Borrell, President of the European Parliament, and Wolfgang Schäussel, President of the European Council, answered questions posed by the MPs and MEPs.

Schäussel called expressly for a revival of the Constitutional Treaty, considering it to be the most successful attempt to date to maintain and develop the achievements of the previous 50 years. He announced a “choreography of the next steps” for the European Council meeting in June 2006 and specific projects to enhance the value of Europe, to be coordinated with the timetable for future European Presidencies. On the question of enlargement, he said the ongoing negotiations with candidate countries should be continued and that the Balkan states should be given a clear European perspective but that the EU’s absorption capacity should be discussed and defined at the same time. Regarding financing of the EU he recommended a review of the financing system for the EU budget and the provision of new own resources.

Commission President Barroso also stressed that the European Commission would remain loyal to the principles of the Constitutional Treaty and regarded 9 May as a fitting moment to take a strategic look at the European project. He believed that the EU needed to become more democratic, transparent and efficient if public confidence in this project was to be regained. He promised to involve national parliaments more in the work at the European level in future and to communicate all draft legislation by the European Commission from the outset to the parliaments of the Member States for their comments. Finally, he defined the most important challenges on the future European agenda: creation of jobs and more economic growth, more transparency, democracy and subsidiarity, environmental risks, terrorism, chronic underdevelopment in parts of the world, and energy.

Practically all participants expressed their extreme satisfaction with the conference format and in their contributions they emphasised the importance of dialogue between MPs with a view to improving cooperation between the national parliaments and the European Parliament.

Conclusions

- Cooperation with the European Parliament, particularly its President Josep Borrell, has been outstanding. The Austrian Parliament has been involved with an equal say in all preparatory phases.
- The format used appears to have been generally approved. The Austrian Parliament has endeavoured in particular to maintain ongoing communication with those countries who would have to make follow-up decisions.
- The joint meeting on the future of Europe did not mark the start of a new European Convention because all 25 governments have signed the Constitutional Treaty and the majority of Member States have already ratified it. A better text than the existing one will not be found.

- The meetings serve primarily to exchange information, opinions and ideas. National parliaments receive updated information on developments within EU institutions, and the European Parliament is informed about discussions in the Member States – especially those that have not yet ratified the Constitutional Treaty. It is not a suitable platform for the adoption of binding decisions, however, since a binding mandate for all participants would be required and would immediately raise questions such as the size of delegations.
- The format could possibly be used in the future to find a solution to the hold-up in the European constitutional process.
- According to the Hague guidelines of July 2004 it is the responsibility of the Conference of the Speakers of the European Parliaments to coordinate interparliamentary activities. The conference in Copenhagen had therefore to decide how this cooperation was to be continued. In the rapporteur's opinion, a continuation and the announcement by the Finnish Parliament and European Parliament concerning the next meeting on 4 and 5 December 2006 in Brussels is to be welcomed.