

Conference of the Speakers of the EU Parliaments
30 June 2006

Contribution of the Speaker of the Folketing, Mr Mejdahl,
On the future of Europe and Interparliamentary Cooperation

Dear Speakers of Parliament and colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

As you will be aware, the principal theme of the conference is the future of the EU and future cooperation between parliaments.

I will begin by offering a few examples of the way in which this theme has been treated during the period of reflection. I will then relate this issue closer to home and raise the question regarding how those of us at this gathering can improve the coordination of interparliamentary cooperation.

Finally, I will set my sights on the future and summarise a number of the ideas and proposals concerning how the national parliaments can improve their active and constructive role in the democratisation of the Europe of tomorrow.

Earlier this month, the European Council took stock of the EU's period of reflection and reached agreement on the general framework for how we can move ahead with this.

First, the heads of state and government decided that the forthcoming German EU Presidency will present a report during the first half of 2007 determining how EU cooperation can be developed in the future. The report will then form the foundation for the decisions that must be made no later than the second half of 2008 during the French EU Presidency. This appears to be a realistic timetable viewed from the vantage point of these decisions.

The European Council has also decided that there is a need for the EU to focus on providing specific political results which benefit citizens.

In this regard, and among other things, the European Council emphasised that the national parliaments should be closely involved in controlling the principle of subsidiarity – as individual parliaments and through parliamentary cooperation in COSAC.

The European Commission has also made a contribution to the debate on the role of the national parliaments as part of the period of reflection. In its report from last May, the Commission stated that there is a need to extend the cooperation with the national

parliaments. The Commission also stated that in future it will forward all EU proposals and consultation documents directly to the national parliaments.

As an innovation, the Commission has additionally invited the national parliaments to react to its proposals.

The question of how interparliamentary dialogue can be strengthened has also been discussed between the parliaments as part of the period of reflection. The European Parliament has played an active role in this debate and has taken the initiative to arrange a series of meetings for national parliamentarians and European parliamentarians. Allow me to briefly recall the meeting in the European Parliament in Brussels, which was held on 8 – 9 May last spring chaired by the President of the European Parliament, Mr. Josep Borrell Fontelles, and the President of the Austrian National Council, Dr. Andreas Khol.

During the period of reflection, COSAC – the cooperative body for the European affairs committees of the national parliaments – has focused on the question of how to strengthen the role of the national

parliaments in controlling the principle of subsidiarity within the framework of the existing treaties.

The question of subsidiarity was the principal theme of the COSAC meeting that was held on 22 – 23 May 2006 in Vienna. The meeting led to a number of recommendations to the Commission regarding such areas as informing the national parliaments of all new EU proposals, and taking account of the reactions from the national parliaments, especially if these reactions concern the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

COSAC also decided that, during the second half of 2006, the national parliaments should examine two EU proposals and in this regard examine whether they comply with the principle of subsidiarity.

I would also applaud the decision of the Conference of Speakers to establish the IPEX database, which will support the national parliaments during the examination new EU proposals.

The IPEX database, which will be launched at this conference, will provide parliaments with access to information and the opportunity to exchange best practices on the way in which individual EU issues are examined in the individual parliaments.

I hope that all the national parliaments will make good use of the IPEX database so that it will become a useful tool in parliamentarians' daily examinations of EU issues. I have noted with satisfaction that from 2007, the Commission will send legislative initiatives and green and white papers to IPEX in a form that enables automatic updating.

The Conference of Speakers has also discussed the issue of the involvement of national parliaments in the EU's decision-making process in recent years. The adoption of the Hague Guidelines in 2004 created an excellent point of departure for these discussions.

As you will be aware, the Hague Guidelines conferred the task of monitoring cooperation between the EU parliaments on the Conference of Speakers.

I believe we can do more to ensure better coordination in this area and thereby achieve a better utilisation of resources.

One of the major obstacles at present is that the Presidency of the Conference of Speakers does not coincide with the normal biannual rotation scheme that applies to the EU Presidency in the Council of Ministers and within the framework of COSAC. There is a need to harmonise the Conference of Speakers with the interparliamentary meetings in COSAC and in the sector committees.

The Conference of Speakers should consider whether it will follow the EU Presidency in the same way as COSAC. Another, quite simple proposal that could strengthen cooperation between the parliaments would be to hold a biannual meeting between the Presidency of the Conference of Speakers and the Presidency of COSAC.

The Hague Guidelines could also be improved by presenting the increasing number of meetings between parliaments in an overall framework. This applies, for instance, to the biannual meetings in COSAC, joint meetings between parliaments' sector committees, and

the major joint parliamentary meetings that the European Parliament has recently taken the initiative to organise.

Each of the meetings I have mentioned makes its own contribution to a stronger parliamentary commitment in Europe – but there is a need for better coordination, partly in order to avoid the unnecessary duplication of work, and partly to ensure the greatest possible penetration.

In conclusion, I will briefly emphasise some of the most important areas where steps could be taken and areas of cooperation that would help to promote stronger parliamentary commitment and thereby heighten democratic legitimacy in the European decision-making processes.

The existing treaty provisions on the principle of subsidiarity should be utilised better. This proposal is fully in line with the encouragement of the European Council in June to strengthen cooperation on the principle of subsidiarity in COSAC.

Cooperation between the Commission and the national parliaments should be improved. This could initially take the form of the Commission forwarding EU proposals and other important EU initiatives directly to the national parliaments and to the new IPEX database.

Second, it would be extremely useful if the Commission would ensure that the national parliaments are informed of the Commission's plans for forthcoming legislative initiatives in the form of clearer legislative and work programmes, and at the joint meetings between the Commission and the national parliaments.

The dialogue between the Commission and the national parliaments can and must be improved. The Commission has called on the national parliaments to examine the Commission's legislative programme, its green and white papers, and other hearing documents. On the basis of this, we must expect that the Commission will also be prepared to take account of the statements it receives from the national parliaments on reports circulated for comment. This view is supported by the conclusions from the June meeting of the

European Council, where the Commission was asked to pay due regard to remarks from the national parliaments.

I would also suggest that the Members of the Commission should be invited to take part in meetings in the national parliaments in connection with such issues as the Commission's annual policy strategy or the annual legislative and work programme.

Consideration could also be given to allowing the Commission to present its annual policy strategy and annual legislative and work programme at a joint interparliamentary meeting, at the Conference of Speakers, for instance, but this could also be done within the framework of COSAC or in the European Parliament.

Allow me finally to express the great pleasure it has given me to note that the European Council has just adopted a new, general policy of transparency, which also means more openness in connection with negotiations in the Council of Ministers when legislation is being tabled.

The principle of transparency is absolutely decisive to ensure that the national parliaments can perform effective parliamentary control of governments' handling of EU issues.

I hope that I may have sown some seeds in my speech that can serve as inspiration for our joint efforts to move ahead with the process of strengthening the commitment of parliaments and the foundation for democratic decision-making in Europe.

In the hope that we all have a pleasant, productive conference, I will once again bid you all a hearty welcome to Copenhagen.