

## Austrian Parliament, Parlamentskorrespondenz Nr. 497: "XXXVth COSAC starts consultations in parliament. Schüssel informs parliamentarians about Austria's EU focuses", 22 May 2006

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(see Parlamentskorrespondenz No. 497 of 22 May 2006)

## XXXVth COSAC starts consultations in parliament Schüssel informs parliamentarians about Austria's EU focuses

Vienna (PK) – The current programme of the Austrian EU Presidency, the future development of the European Union, greater involvement of national parliaments in law-making at the European level and relations between the EU and the West Balkans are the main agenda items in a two-day meeting of the Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees of national Parliaments of the EU member states and the European Parliament in the Austrian Parliament building, which was opened today by Werner Fasslabend, chairman of the National Council Standing Subcommittee on European Union Affairs. One of the aims of the XXXVth COSAC, he had said earlier, was to follow up the subsidiarity conference in St. Pölten with concrete action to involve national parliaments more effectively in EU law-making and to implement the decisions adopted in St. Pölten.

At the opening of the COSAC today Fasslabend, who is chairing the conference together with Gottfried Kneifel, chairman of the Federal Council EU Committee, recalled that in the late nineteenth century 11 nations had already met and negotiated in these historical surroundings. The conference in St. Pölten, he continued, had clearly demonstrated the great interest by national parliaments in the future of the European Union and its identity – “where does Europe begin and where does it end?”.

In his opening address Gottfried Kneifel (FPÖ-VP) from the Federal Council pointed out that not only the actors at the European level but also the national parliaments played a particularly important role in the current reflection phase on the future of the European Union. For him national parliamentarians were indispensable mediators and intermediaries between the demands and expectations of the people and the activities of their political representatives at the European level.

Europe needed the trust and collaboration of European citizens and the commitment at national and regional level, he said. It was a question of what the citizens had and expected from Europe. In a survey they had called for comparable standards of living in all EU countries, the introduction of the euro throughout the EU and a common constitution.

He said that the subsidiarity principle was the key to greater contact with the people and acceptance by them of the EU. The decision-making process had to involve the citizenry, who had little understanding for EU standard rulings – “without any apparent additional value”. The subsidiarity principle had already been defined in the Treaty of Amsterdam and now that the diagnosis and therapy were known, it was time to put the words into action.

The first agenda item dealt with by the parliamentarians was the programme of the Austrian EU Presidency. In his opening address, “Europe – Perspectives and Pragmatism”, Federal Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel said that the year 2005 had been a difficult one for the EU. The constitution project had nearly broken down following two negative referendums and the EU countries were in complete disaccord regarding the budget for 2007 to 2013. The mutual confidence of the EU institutions in one another and of the citizens of Europe in the EU

as a whole had both been delivered severe blows. SchÃ¼ssel therefore regarded 'holding Europe together' as one of the most important tasks of the moment.

It was Austria's intention to 'bring in' all the countries of Europe, said SchÃ¼ssel. He did not think much of the idea of a 'core Europe'. Austria was also endeavouring to bring some zest into the discussion on Europe.

He pointed to the consensus that had been achieved regarding the EU budget as an achievement by Austria, noting that the research budget had been increased, the budget for trans-European networks more than doubled and greater stimulus for student exchanges had been established. There was also more money for SMEs and for cooperation in foreign and security policies. As a final achievement, Austria had also got the service directive on track.

Referring to the subsidiarity principle, SchÃ¼ssel welcomed the promise by EU Commission President JosÃ© Manuel Barroso to involve national parliaments more in EU projects by way of a self-commitment by the European Commission, and to explain the need for a European solution whenever legislation was being planned. The subsidiarity principle was a good response to the impression that the EU was on a tilt and everything was sliding towards the centre, he continued.

SchÃ¼ssel strongly welcomed the successful accession of ten new countries and the imminent addition of Bulgaria and Romania. He admitted, however, that the pace of enlargement had been too much for some. The EU also had to ensure that it remained viable. In that respect he favoured an objectified membership procedure, as he called it.

Other focuses of the Austrian Presidency included the energy strategy, a sustainability strategy and the Western Balkans. The reflection process on the future of Europe and the Constitution should be continued with a defined timetable to enable a decision to be made in 2007.

## Discussion

The discussion was opened by Herman De Croo (Belgium) who called for greater parliamentary collaboration at the European level to overcome the continued clash of interests between the European Parliament and the national parliaments. Frans Timmermans (Netherlands) said that the europeanisation of the national debate should not be ignored, otherwise Europe would not receive the confidence it required. Ludek Sefzig (Czech Republic) called for a reparliamentarisation of European decisions. Like Lord Grenfell (United Kingdom) he complained of a lack of transparency.

On the question of the Constitution, Kurt Bodewig (Germany) called for calm and a continuation of public debate. It had to be clearly shown that a constitutional treaty would safeguard the fundamental and co-determination rights of every individual. Christian Philip (France) also sought a signal from Europe to bring home to citizens the added benefits of the EU in the form, for example, of infrastructure projects. Armando Franca (Portugal) also believed that better communication was required to convey to the people that Europe was a success for them. Anton Kokalj (Slovenia) added that confidence could be strengthened if greater emphasis was placed on cultural cooperation.

The question of enlargement was touched on by Neven Mimica (Croatia), who called for pragmatic solutions and a continuation of the process. Andrzej Galazewski (Poland) stressed the need for specific accession criteria for future members, while Elisabeth Arnold (Denmark) said that new Member States would be welcome if they observed the rule of law, democracy and human rights, in which case culture and religion would play less of a role.

Federal Chancellor Wolfgang SchÃ¼ssel emphasised that more time should be allowed in principle for Europe in national debate. He said that the Constitutional Treaty contained a wealth of additional individual rights for citizens and co-determination rights for national parliaments. He therefore failed to understand how this Treaty could be presented in public as the door to a centralistic Europe controlled from Brussels. The draft was at all events much better than anything that had gone before and should not therefore be discarded so easily.

The Europe of projects, as proposed by French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier, was not in SchÃ¼ssel's opinion incompatible with the constitution project. It was by contrast an aid, a 'shoe horn', to show that these projects were in the interest of the citizens of Europe and could be best implemented in the framework of a constitutional treaty. SchÃ¼ssel warned against delegating Europe to the Commission and the European Parliament. Europe should be a joint project by all institutions and it was the task of politicians and governments to be ready at all times to justify this project to their citizens. In that context he regretted the fact that the European

vision was blinkered in all countries by a certain provincialism and called for a concerted effort to overcome this danger.

In the discussion on the Constitution the Chancellor was not in favour of a fixed date for a final decision and stressed that Europe should remain calm and take the time necessary.

NOTE: Photos of this event will be posted in due course in the photo album on the Parliament's website: [www.parlament.gv.at](http://www.parlament.gv.at).

