

26 February 2002

INTRODUCTORY SPEECH
BY PRESIDENT V. GISCARD D'ESTAING
TO THE CONVENTION ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

My thanks to the President of the Council (for creating us)

to the President of the European Parliament (for accommodating us, and providing our contact with the electors of the only elected European institution)

to the President of the Commission (for inspiring us, and sharing with us the experience of his institution).

Mesdames, Messieurs,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Meine Damen und Herren,
Signore e Signori (IT)
Señoras y Señores (ES)
Dames en heren (NL)
Mine damer og herrer (DK)
Κυρίες και Κύριοι (GR)
Minhas Senhoras e Meus Senhores (PT)
Hyvät naiset ja herrat (FI)
Mina damer och herrar (SV)
Szanowni Państwo (PL)

You are the members of the Convention on the future of Europe.

You are the "Conventionists" of Europe.

You therefore have the power vested in any political body: to succeed, or to fail.

On one side, the yawning abyss of failure. On the other, strait is the gate to success.

If we fail, we will add to the current confusion in the European project, which we know will not be able, following the current round of enlargement, to provide a system to manage our continent which is both effective and clear to the public. What has been created over fifty years will reach its limit, and be threatened with dislocation.

If we succeed, that is to say if we agree to propose a concept of the European Union which matches our continental dimension and the requirements of the 21st century, a concept which can bring unity to our continent and respect for its diversity, then you will be able to leave here and return home, whether you are Italo-European, Anglo-European, Polish-European – or any of the others – with the feeling of having contributed, modestly but effectively, to writing a new chapter in the history of Europe.



I should like, at the start of this Convention, to tell you how essential our work is for Europe and indeed for the world; to tell you also that our task will be a difficult one, as it will have to combine the dynamism of a movement bringing together countries and peoples, with great rigour of thought and method; I shall conclude with a call for enthusiasm, a call to you, members of the Convention, and to the leaders of the Member States and the candidate countries, and to all the citizens of Europe, to the eldest, who were the victims of the cruel confrontations of the past, and to the youngest, who dream of a wide area of freedom and opportunity opening for them in Europe.



The European Council could not more forcefully underline the importance of our work than by creating this powerful Convention team, of which you are members.

This team of 105 members is strong enough to meet the challenge facing us:

- the Convention will rely on two Vice-Chairmen of the first rank, Mr Giuliano Amato and Mr Jean-Luc Dehaene, who have held high office in two of the founding States;

- the presence amongst the representatives of the European Parliament, the national parliaments and the governments of personalities of great stature, who have studied the facts of the European debate, will ensure the quality of their dialogue with the national bodies from which they come, and towards which they will play an indispensable intermediary role;
- here, I would like warmly to thank those bodies which have responded positively to my call to appoint women to represent them;
- as for the two representatives of the Commission, they will help us to benefit from their great expertise, and their practical knowledge of the Europe of the Communities;
- the strong representation from the candidate countries, with 39 members, will ensure that the Convention has precise knowledge of their aspirations, and of the role they wish to play in Europe;
- the post of Secretary-General to the Convention will be held by a senior diplomat, with experience of the European institutions. I would like to thank the United Kingdom Government for facilitating his appointment.

Finally, the small team at the General Secretariat, which is young and talented and selected exclusively on its merits will, I am sure, constitute a brilliant "think tank" for the great European adventure, and will help to make our proceedings consistent and methodical.

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The Convention is part of the rich and fertile continuum of European history.

The distance we have travelled since Jean Monnet, Konrad Adenauer, Paul-Henri Spaak and Alcide de Gasperi is vast and scarcely credible.

Your very presence together in this room would have appeared unimaginable, would have seemed like a dream to the British, the Germans, the French, and the Dutch less than sixty years ago, and to the Czechs, Hungarians and Romanians less than fifteen years ago.

Europe has moved forward step by step, from Treaty to Treaty. The road has been lined with partial agreements and with crises which have quickly been overcome. The most striking feature is that Europe may have appeared at certain periods to be blocked, but it has never taken a step backwards.

In changing their currency, showing a remarkable capacity to adapt and a sort of popular joy, 302 million Europeans have just cast off the reproach of euro-sclerosis and shown that they are able to approve what is proposed to them when they judge it to be simple and useful.

All along this road, the European institutions, the Council, the European Parliament, the Commission, and the Court of Justice, have provided sterling service, to which we must pay tribute.

At the same time, we must admit that these measures are reaching their limits. The process of European union is showing signs of flagging, as the Laeken Declaration makes clear.

The decision-making machinery has become more complex, to the point of being unintelligible to the general public. Since Maastricht, the latest Treaties have been difficult to negotiate and have not met their original aims: discussions within the Institutions have often given precedence to national interests over consideration of the common European good. Finally, the abstention rate at European elections has reached a worrying level: in 1999 it exceeded the highly symbolic 50% threshold for the first time!

The shortcomings affect Europe in its present configuration. They will be even more critical in an enlarged Europe.

We must remedy them in the interests of Europe, but also in the interests of the world.

Today's world lacks a strong, united and peaceful Europe.

The world would feel better if it could count on Europe, a Europe which spoke with a single voice to affirm respect for its alliances, but also to proclaim, whenever necessary, a message of tolerance and moderation, of openness towards difference, and of respect for human rights.

Let us not forget that from the ancient world of Greece and Rome until the Age of Enlightenment, our continent has made three fundamental contributions to humanity: reason, humanism and freedom.

Indeed, everyone on our planet would feel better if the strong voice of Europe could be heard.

If we succeed, in 25 years or 50 years – the distance separating us from the Treaty of Rome – Europe's role in the world will have changed.

It will be respected and listened to, not only as the economic power it already is, but as a political power which will talk on equal terms to the greatest powers on our planet, either existing or future, and will have the means to act to affirm its values, ensure its security and play an active role in international peace-keeping.

Our work, Honourable Members of the Convention, will be only one phase in the new Europe, but it is a key stage in giving our multinational adventure a fresh start.

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Europe is at present marking time on account of several factors: the tangled skein of powers, the complexity of procedures, and perhaps also the weakening of political resolve; but there is, in my view, one prime reason: the difficulty of combining a strong feeling of belonging to the European Union with a continuing sense of national identity.

This difficulty already exists today. But it will be accentuated by the number and diversity of States taking part tomorrow in the life of the European Union.

This requirement is relatively new. During the first decades of the union of Europe, when national identities were still strong – to the point of fuelling bloody confrontations in order to protect or extend them, and when only a small and relatively homogenous Europe was involved – the only concern was to further European integration.

Since the 1990s, we have witnessed the growth of another need: the need for compatibility between the desire to be part of a strong European Union, and to remain solidly rooted in national, political, social and cultural life.

We must ensure that governments and citizens develop a strong, recognised, European "affectio societatis", while retaining their natural attachment to their national identity.

It was in the light of all these aspects that the Laeken European Council decided to create the Convention on the Future of Europe, of which you are members, assigning to it the task of preparing for the reform of Europe's structures and – if we prove equal to the task - setting us on the path towards a Constitution for Europe.



What will our programme be?

And how shall we conduct our proceedings?

The present situation of Europe prompts us to look back, to return to our sources and to ask ourselves what is the ultimate goal of the European project.

The first stage of our work will thus be one of open, attentive listening.

As members of the Convention we will have to ask each other, and ask all our interlocutors, this question: "what do Europeans expect of Europe, at the beginning of the 21st century?".

We must embark on our task without preconceived ideas, and form our vision of the new Europe by listening constantly and closely to all our partners, governors and governees, economic and social partners, representatives of regional authorities – already present here – members of associations and civil society represented in the forum, but also those who have no other identity than that they form part of Europe.

In listening, we must pay special attention to two groups: young people, for whom I would like us to be able to organise a "Convention for the Young People of Europe", which would meet using our own model as its basis; and the citizens of the candidate countries, who will be both discovering the European Union and learning how it works.

We will make use of contemporary, interactive listening methods, particularly on the Internet. Everyone must have an opportunity to be heard, which of course presupposes effective, decentralised organisation, making possible a dialogue with no ideological or partisan barriers.

Similarly, there is a desire for interactive surveys, enabling civil society to react to some of our future proposals.

Vice-Chairman Jean-Luc Dehaene has agreed to coordinate the Convention's activities in that area.

Our first meetings will be devoted to listening to what Europe wants.

Our survey will in particular cover how Europeans imagine Europe 50 years hence. Do they want a Europe tending towards homogeneity – a more uniform Europe – driven forward by a process of harmonisation?

Or do they prefer a Europe which would keep its diversity, while respecting cultural and historical identities? These two objectives will obviously result in different approaches.

We shall also have to be more attentive to an issue which the Nice Declaration placed at the head of the demands being made on our Convention and of which the Laeken Declaration underlined the importance: defining the respective powers of the European Union and the Member States: the answer to the famous question: who does what in Europe?

What should the powers of the Union and the States be? Must the emphasis be placed on exclusive competence or should we adapt to a large area of shared competence? What should be the means of exercising these powers so that they are understandable to the public?

During this listening phase we shall be able to draw on the very fruitful work conducted in the European Parliament.

Perhaps, to make the process easier for our interlocutors in civil society, we should draw up a kind of "questionnaire on Europe" as has already been done in some Member States.

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After this listening phase, we shall have to conduct two parallel approaches.

First of all, we shall have to seek answers to the questions raised in the Laeken Declaration. They fall into six broad groups: fundamental questions on Europe's role; the division of competence in the European Union; simplification of the Union's instruments; how the institutions work, and their democratic legitimacy; a single voice for Europe in international affairs; and, finally, the approach to a Constitution for European citizens.

At the same time, we shall have to consider carefully the various prescriptions for Europe's Future which others have put forward, and which are now in circulation.

At this stage, our role will not be to make value judgments on them, but simply to examine them, together with all their implications, and to check their consistency, particularly in terms of the issues raised at Laeken, so as to gauge their impact on the future of Europe 25 years and 50 years from now.

In particular, we shall consider the following formulae:

- the organisation of the European institutions resulting from the Treaty of Nice;
- the plan for a Europe organised along federal lines, as put forward by high-level German decision-makers in particular;
- the document prepared by the European Commission on modernising the Community method;
- the solutions submitted under the banner of a "federation of nation states", whether or not they involve the creation of a second chamber.

Once that examination has been completed, the Convention will be able to embark on the third stage of its work: its recommendations, and indeed its proposal.

We shall have to respond to the request for simplification of the Treaties, with the aim of achieving a single Treaty, readable by all, understandable by all.

The Laeken Declaration leaves the Convention free to choose between submitting options or making a single recommendation.

It would be contrary to the logic of our approach to choose now.

However, there is no doubt that, in the eyes of the public, our recommendation would carry considerable weight and authority if we could manage to achieve broad consensus on a single proposal which we could all present.

If we were to reach consensus on this point, we would thus open the way towards a Constitution for Europe.

In order to avoid any disagreement over semantics, let us agree now to call it: a "constitutional treaty for Europe".



I now come to the conduct of our proceedings.

Each of us can perceive the immensity of the task which faces us if we are to carry our discussions through to their conclusion and draft texts reflecting our proposals.

The one-year timeframe which we have been given is relatively short.

We shall endeavour to comply with it.

However, I must say here and now that I am not prepared to sacrifice either the authenticity of our survey of European public opinion or the quality of work of our Convention and the proposals it draws up.

The practical working methods of our Convention are not a matter for this inaugural meeting. We shall finalise them at our first working meeting.

However, I should like to put to you three comments which seem to me important for the direction of our work.

1. We are neither an Intergovernmental Conference nor a Parliament.

We are a Convention.

We are not an Intergovernmental Conference because we have not been given a mandate by Governments to negotiate on their behalf the solutions which we propose.

We are not a Parliament because we are not an institution elected by citizens to draft legislative texts. That role belongs to the European Parliament and to national Parliaments.

We are a Convention.

What does that mean?

A Convention is a group of men and women meeting for the sole purpose of preparing a joint proposal.

The principle underlying our existence is our unity.

The members of the four components of our Convention must not regard themselves simply as spokespersons for those who appointed them – Governments, the European Parliament, national Parliaments and the Commission – no more than Giuliano Amato will speak on behalf of Italy, Jean-Luc Dehaene on behalf of Belgium or I myself on behalf of France.

Each person will of course remain loyal to his or her brief, but must make his or her personal contribution to the work of the Convention.

Let us be clear about it. This Convention cannot succeed if it is only a place for expressing divergent opinions. It needs to become the melting-pot in which, month by month, a common approach is worked out.

In order to be ready to listen, the Convention will have to turn towards the outside world.

However, in order to think about what proposals we can make, the members of the Convention will have to turn towards each other and gradually foster a "Convention spirit".

Outwards to listen. Inwards to make proposals.

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2. My second remark concerns what will happen within the framework of the Convention itself.

The Laeken Declaration gave the Convention two structures: a Chairman and two Vice-Chairmen and a Presidium of twelve members.

Some of you have expressed concerns about the role of the Presidium and the Plenary, fearing that the bulk of the work will in practice be carried out by the Presidium.

To you I would say that, for me, the Convention is the Convention!

It is normal for the proceedings of a Convention to be prepared and organised by a Presidium, as is the case for any assembly or organisation.

However, discussions will take place here and will be public.

Everything else will depend to a large extent on you and on the content of your contributions.

If your contributions genuinely seek to prepare a consensus, and if you take account of the proposals and comments made by the other members of the Convention, then the content of the final consensus can be worked out step by step here within the Convention.

3. My third remark is simply a thought.

Our Convention represents the first occasion since the Messina Conference in 1955 for European leaders to set aside the resources and time to examine in detail the future of the European Union.

Although there have been several Intergovernmental Conferences in the intervening years, these provided an arena for diplomatic negotiations between Member States in which each party sought legitimately to maximise its gains without regard for the overall picture.

For its part, the European Council has decided on various occasions to hold meetings on the future of the European institutions, but those discussions have seldom lasted for longer than a day because of the pressure of international events and the constraints of the Council's schedule.

The proceedings of our Convention are therefore by way of an intellectual reassessment of the future of the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by calling on your enthusiasm.

A word which comes from the Greek "en-thousia", meaning "inspired by a god". In our case, you might say "inspired by a goddess" - the goddess Europa!

We are often upbraided for neglecting the European dream, for contenting ourselves with building a complicated and opaque structure which is the preserve of economic and financial cognoscenti.

So let us dream of Europe!

Let us imagine a continent at peace, freed of its barriers and obstacles, where history and geography are finally reconciled, allowing all the states of Europe to build their future together after following their separate ways to West and East.

A space of freedom and opportunity where individuals can move as they wish to study, work, show enterprise or broaden their cultural horizons.

A space clearly identified by the way in which it successfully distils the dynamism of creation, the need for solidarity and protection of the poorest and the weakest.

But also a space in which strong cultural identities continue to exist and thrive, both conscious of their origins and keen for the stimulation that exchange can bring.

Let us also imagine Europe's voice in the world, its unity ensuring its influence and authority.

The richness of its culture and the ever-renewed strength of its creativity are known to all.

Europe has brought the world reason, humanism and freedom.

It has the authority to send forth a message of moderation, preaching the quest for mutually acceptable solutions and a passionate attachment to peace.

Its tolerance is ensured by its cultural diversity.

It must also show itself capable of ensuring its own security, whatever the dangers facing it.

We can indeed dream of Europe, and persuade others to share that dream!

If we were to fail, each country would return to the free trade system. None of us – not even the largest of us – would have the power to take on the giants of this world. We would then remain locked in on ourselves, grimly analysing the causes of our decline and fall.

Our call for enthusiasm goes out to other Europeans, but first and foremost to ourselves.

We must have a passionate interest in the success of our task if we are to engage and persuade others. It is a task modest in form but immense in content, for if it succeeds in accordance with our mandate, it will light up the future of Europe.

Long live Europe!

Thank you.