

50th anniversary of the European Parliament commemorated in Strasbourg - 12 March 2008

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To celebrate the European Parliament's 50th anniversary on 19 March 2008, the presidents of the EP, the Council and the Commission each addressed the House in a special sitting in Strasbourg plenary on Wednesday, 12 March 2008. The speeches were preceded and followed by performances by the European Youth Orchestra.

In his opening address, European Parliament President Hans-Gert **Pütttering** first welcomed several former presidents of the European Parliament, the president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, speakers of national parliaments and numerous other dignitaries.

Mr Pütttering stressed that "step by step, the European Parliament has fought to secure more and more rights and has become ever more aware of its responsibility and of what it can do; and today it does credit to its name".

"Today, we are 785 Members from 27 European nations; we represent seven political groups and more than 150 national political parties; we are both a legislative and a budgetary authority, on an equal footing with the Council of Ministers; we exercise oversight over the European Commission and elect its President; we are the representatives of close to 500 million Union citizens; we reflect all political tendencies in the European Union; we have become self-assured and a major player in European politics", he said.

Talking about the Reform Treaty President Pütttering said "The Treaty of Lisbon will further strengthen our rights. In future, decisions on important issues now of concern to citizens in the European Union can be taken only if the European Parliament gives its consent".

"The Treaty of Lisbon and the Charter of Fundamental Rights will make a decisive contribution towards making democracy and parliamentarianism in the European Union a reality at all levels. We can be proud of our consistent support for the Reform Treaty and for the Charter of Fundamental Rights."

To applause from the House, he stressed the role of national parliaments, saying "the cooperation between the European Parliament and national parliaments is of special concern to us. We must endeavour, in future, to maintain that cooperation".

"An achievement worth embracing and celebrating"

The president-in-office of the Council, Janez **Janšcaronja**, prime minister of Slovenia, began by saying "Ce n'est pas sans émotion que je prends la parole", echoing the words spoken by Robert Schuman, the first President of the European Parliamentary Assembly, in his inaugural address on 19 March 1958.

Mr Janšcaronja recalled that, in the aftermath of two wars and in a world dominated by East-West tensions, "six Member States of the European Communities brought together 168 million Europeans,

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healed the wounds of the war, made economic progress and, together with the Euro-Atlantic alliance, safeguarded an area of freedom and democracy" - although "most of the remaining part of Europe, regrettably, existed in a totalitarian Communist environment".

But now, he said, an "entirely different image presents itself". With the "elimination of the borders that once divided Europe", "practically all of wider Europe now also lives in freedom and democracy. This is an achievement worth embracing and celebrating."

The existence and the operation of the European Parliament from 1958 is "a direct reflection of the progress achieved in the process of integration over the past fifty years", he added.

However, "if the first fifty years of the EU have been dedicated to the European agenda - to our own political and economic development and reform - the next fifty years will also put the global agenda at the forefront of our attention." Apart from economic issues, energy and climate change, Mr Janša highlighted human rights and intercultural dialogue as areas in which the European Parliament plays a key role.

The range of EU activities is increasing all the time but a single rule applies to them all: "success is directly proportional to unity". In the words of Jean Monnet, "Each man begins the world afresh. Only institutions grow wiser; they accumulate collective experience." "Our joint task is therefore to promote the European collective experience. From this experience, we can draw the strength to address current challenges", argued Mr Janša.

On a personal note, the prime minister told the House "I know what this time represents for our generation, being born myself in the same year as the European Parliament" and he looked forward to "the next major anniversary of this home of European democracy".

European Commission President Josė Manuel Barroso

It has been 50 years since Schuman brought together the three European communities in a new single assembly, but the political choice outlining a European representative democracy has been confirmed at every subsequent stage of the European construction, said Commission President Josė Manuel Barroso.

The founding fathers foresaw that Europe needed lasting and strong institutions to enshrine the ever-deeper links among the Six. These institutions also had to be able to evolve, he continued, noting that Europe's "unique institutional triangle" has since proven its vitality by adapting to vast growth in the tasks entrusted to the Union and to the dynamics of enlargement.

"We owe this success to the ingenuity and balance of our institutional construction, which does not follow the usual distribution of powers. We owe it also to the way we work, which respects both the Community method and subsidiarity", he added.

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Fifty years on, Europe, living in peace and spanning the continent, still needs strong institutions to tackle the challenge of our time: globalisation. Its experience of opening markets, accompanied by rules that reflect its values of freedom, solidarity and sustainable development, mean that "Europe alone has the dimensions, institutions and instruments necessary to shape globalisation", said the President.

Mr Barroso saluted Parliament's contribution to the European project, in every field of daily life. In 50 years, Parliament has gained many powers and prerogatives. Some of this power derives from the peoples' votes. Some is formal, such as co-decision and budgetary powers. And some derives from political influence - parliament has become a co-legislator and an influential partner in the institutional triangle, but has also developed close links with national parliaments, he said.

Parliament's power has strengthened Europe as a whole. A strong European Parliament is an indispensable partner for other institutions, and in particular the European Commission, said the President, adding that the Lisbon Treaty, once ratified, will extend Parliament's powers, and also strengthen the Commission's dual democratic legitimacy through stronger links with Parliament and the Council.

Mr Barroso concluded with a quote from Portuguese writer Agustina Bessa Luis: "At 15 years old you have a future; at 25, a problem; at 40, experience; but before 50 years old, you have no history".