

**Address by the President of the European Council, José M. Aznar
at the inaugural meeting of the Convention on the future of Europe
Brussels, 28/02/2002**

Mr President of the Parliament,
Mr President of the Commission,
Mr President of the Convention,
Honourable Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Convention starts its work today of implementing the Laeken European Council agreement to prepare the next Intergovernmental Conference in accordance with criteria of breadth and transparency.

Today, according to the predictions of the Laeken Declaration, we are solemnly opening the Convention, which will be presided over by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in view of the enormous prestige of his long political career.

All of you can imagine that this ceremony is of particular satisfaction to me, as well as to the Spanish Presidency.

We are at the disposal of the President, Vice-Presidents and Members of the Convention with regard to whatever may be appropriate to enable their assignment to achieve the proposed objective, within the scheduled deadline.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Nice is the reason why we are here today. A laborious shared agreement was concluded at Nice on the essential institutional reforms that had to accompany the enlargement and prepare the Union of the future.

The Treaty of Nice responded to a powerful political reality, as is the reunification of the continent, and it was possible to approve it thanks to the skilful work of the French Presidency.

Immediately thereafter, the Heads of State and Government convened the Convention that is starting now, in the knowledge that the new stage calls for new forms of operation and deliberation in order to continue to create "more Europe", as stated by the motto for this six-month period.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The European unity achieved until now constitutes the victory of a historic experience. Our Union today undoubtedly rests on the common policies and solid foundations of a single market and a single currency. Therefore I do not share the opinions that perceive an existential crisis in the process of integration.

On the contrary, such an alleged crisis coincides with an especially dynamic phase in the unitary

process, as attested to by the rapidity of the putting into circulation of the euro, the swift progress recorded in the new Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, the effective beginning of a common defence policy, and the promotion of the processes of modernisation and economic and social reform.

Nevertheless, it happens that the world situation makes it imperative for the Union to quicken the pace of its advance. An illustrious European philosopher, the Spaniard Ortega y Gasset, called for the unity of the European states in order to counteract nationalism and the danger of decline in this region of the world called "Europe". In this connection, the European will at this time must sense the urgency of redefining its role in a world deeply transformed at the passing of one century to another.

But, let us be aware that it is our successes which now enable us to strive towards more ambitious goals. I believe that it will only be possible to attain the new objectives if we pursue, as the primary guide to our action, the consolidation of the European project.

That is not, as might appear, an easy task, and nor does it have a conservative – or if you prefer – a conformist bent. It involves developing and improving two basic ideas of the process of integration.

The first is that our future depends on the balance between Europe's deep cultural unity and its obvious historic diversity. The political tomorrow must be one of pluralistic constitutionalisation, which respects the many legal systems of its Member States.

It is the development of a system of law, the European Union law that the Laeken Declaration describes as "the path to a Constitution for European citizens".

The second principle of European integration is the progressive assumption, by the Union, of policies that until now fell within the exclusive sphere of states.

Combining a better distribution and definition of responsibilities within the European Union is certainly not an easy task, since we must be able to offer formulas and solutions that will amount to a real improvement in the daily lives of all Europeans.

Undoubtedly, the responsibilities must be clarified and better defined, so that people may more easily perceive who does what in the Union, and may in this way hold it accountable.

But this exercise must not bring about a regression in the already-implemented and consolidated European project.

We must not go back to each of us doing on our own what until now we have done together, which produced an unsuspected standard of living with mutual benefits for the whole of Europe.

The entry into circulation of the euro must be understood as a point of departure and not of arrival.

This very important commitment, which we have recently fulfilled, must direct our work towards those areas in which the people (and the international situation) expect intensified action from the Union: the enhancement of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, the modernisation of the European social model in order to achieve full employment, and the development of a true common foreign and defence policy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

European integration is not an end in itself, but rather a means at the service of the most positive values of European culture: fundamental rights for everyone – without discrimination, pluralistic democracies, shared prosperity and economic competition.

The major objective that must inspire the work of this Convention is that of projecting a sustainable and effective Europe: a Europe in which all its citizens may enjoy, on an equal basis, the benefits of the internal market, the single currency and the European social model.

Notwithstanding the great progress made, there is still much ground to cover. Only an agenda of concrete projects and achievements will succeed in giving people a sense of identity with the building of a political Union. If Europe has a future – and I am fully convinced that it has – it must be something in which Europeans truly believe, and which they support and evaluate positively.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to convey to you the great confidence that the European Council, and I personally, have in this Convention and in its President. An immense number of figures of relevance and prestige will be participating in its work.

I am fully confident that the Convention and its President will be able to meet the expectations of the Europeans, by focusing on the issues that are truly of concern to our citizens.

The success of this Convention will depend on its ability to be receptive to the concerns and expectations expressed by society through – among other channels – the different national debates and the European Civic Forum, whose contributions will be included in the discussions of this Convention.

In order that the work of the Convention may proceed in an orderly and effective manner, it is essential, on the one hand, that it maintain a synergetic relationship with the European Council, since this Institution will be responsible for taking the definitive decisions on the reform of the treaties; and on the other hand, that the period planned for the duration of the work is adhered to. Only in this way will the Intergovernmental Conference be able to conclude a new treaty within a

short period of time, as would be desirable.

The challenge facing this Convention goes beyond the demanding and difficult task of preparing the reforms. It is also a matter of confirming the validity of a procedure already used for drawing up the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The consolidation of the model would mean an extremely important step in the necessary evolution of the system established for decision-taking, and would be another reason for the recognition that the Convention will deserve in the extent to which it is successful in making ideal proposals for consolidating the European project, for furthering integration and for moving forward in the process of constitutionalisation of the European Union.

I wish to conclude by congratulating all the Members of the Convention on the honour you have received by being chosen to undertake this great responsibility, and by expressing my hope that your efforts will be rewarded by success.
