

Speech by Ambassador João de Valleria Representative of the Portuguese Government

Plenary session of the European Convention
21-22 March 2002

I read once again with close attention that part of the Laeken Declaration which we received as basis for today's discussion and, in particular, the opinions and expectations of the "European citizen" which it describes.

As an European citizen, but also as representative of the Portuguese government in this Convention – the reason why I am present in this room – I would like to express some personal reflections on today's subject – what to expect from Europe in the XXI century. Should my opinions not always coincide with those of the "Laeken citizen", it is probably due to the fact that the richness of European identities and cultures does not allow for such aspirations to be singly voiced.

In order to build the future it is foremost necessary to look at the present and understand the past; and I must say that I do not share the ideas of those who look upon Europe as if it was starting this very day.

The last fifty years of integration have been a huge success. The European Union has been capable of creating and deepening an unmatched area of peace and stability, prosperity and democracy, standing out as an antechamber and prime example for the globalised world. I believe that its present evolution is no less demanding: we just introduced a single currency and are now responsible for the success of this milestone in European integration. In Lisbon, we launched a comprehensive strategy that aims to transform the Union into the most competitive and dynamic economy in the world. We are consolidating a new Common Security and Defence Policy and, therefore, strengthening the external dimension of the European Union. And we firmly progress in the field of Justice and Home Affairs with a view to establishing an area of freedom, security and justice, from which every citizen in Europe will benefit.

In this exercise we should avoid either gripping too firmly to the past, or ignoring the challenges of the future, and especially that of ensuring that our initiatives, policies and institutions rise up to respond, in a positive and dynamic manner, to the needs of an enlarged Union. But I believe it would be a great – and probably irreparable – mistake if Europe in the XXI century were not to anchor itself in that which enabled its success in the XX century: from my point of view, it would be from that starting point that we should take a leap forward – and hopefully, a substantial leap forward - in the path of integration.

For that purpose we have to better our institutions, simplify the decision-making processes and make them more efficient, render the Union more transparent and bring it closer to its citizens and, so I hope, enshrine the concept of European citizenship by means of incorporating the Charter of Fundamental Rights into the Treaties.

However, these institutional questions must not be considered in a political, social and economical vacuum. Much more than on theoretical debates on juridical and constitutional goals or ideal integration models, the success of the European Union lies on the coherent development of a wide range of policies with a direct impact on our citizen's daily lives, as well as on the necessary means for their implementation.

Our mission is to promote an innovative and constructive debate, useful to the development of the Union's potential. Thus, when devising the shape of the future of Europe, we should avoid two false paths towards apparent salvation:

- one that would gradually, albeit inadvertently, lead us to take a step backwards, not only by defiling the nature of our common policies which materialise and sustain our integration model, but also by depriving us from those instruments which guarantee its flexibility, and that are responsible for much of the substantial progresses in European integration;

- or one that would divert us from the respect of fundamental principles on to the road of worn-out political archetypes, in sharp contrast to the Community spirit and the true nature of the European Union.

We should therefore move forward, which is the opposite of going back, running away or taking a step aside. And it should also be through this particular perspective that we should evaluate the different proposals put forward in this Convention.

Moving forward means strengthening and deepening the Community method, gradually extending it to new areas of activity, and maintaining the central role of the European Commission as the guarantor of the common interest. Moving forward also means respecting the institutional balance as well as those essential principles which sustain the Union's basic social contract: equality, solidarity and confidence among States.