

ANDREW DUFF'S PRESENTATION TO THE CONVENTION, 21 MARCH 2002

Mr President, on behalf of the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform party may I congratulate you on your appointment and on your seminal speech of 28 February. We fully share your aim of establishing "a broad consensus on a single proposal" that opens "the way towards a Constitution for Europe".

The Convention will achieve that goal if we work in parallel on three levels. First, at the top, we need to draft the legal text of a constitutional treaty, a basic law. In due course I shall be tabling a proposal for just such a text of between 15 and 20 articles.

Second, we need to adapt the existing treaties so that they conform with the constitution. We must seize the chance to simplify, rationalise and shorten the old texts. We can also improve vastly on the track record of the IGCs of Amsterdam and Nice in adjusting the decision-making procedures across the whole range of EU policy. Most of the arguments have been well-rehearsed. We know the pros and cons, for example, of more powers of assent and co-decision for the Parliament, more transparency and QMV in the Council and of less comitology.

Third, we must galvanise the institutions into undertaking essential internal reforms, some of which - like the statutes of members and of political parties as far as the Parliament is concerned - have been sadly neglected in the past. Already we see the pressure of the Convention working its magic on these sub-treaty issues. We must coordinate our work closely with whatever comes out of the Seville European Council concerning the reform of the Council and the reform of the regulatory methods of the Union. If the European Council makes no progress, the Convention must be ready to take up the challenge itself.

Mr President, this three-tier approach suggests to me that we should establish at different stages three working groups of the Convention. First we establish a working group on sub-treaty reform; then we set up a second group on the constitution that deals with the federal question; finally, a third group revises the present treaties. May I invite the Praesidium to discuss that proposal?

What are the imperatives that will drive me and my Liberal colleagues? Our primary goal is to enhance the capability of the European Union to act effectively at home and abroad. Only by improving the quality of its policy delivery will the EU appeal more to the citizen. If more Europe is desirable, we must build a more robust political system with stronger democratic sinews. More power at the centre obliges us to build in the safeguard of installing a fundamental rights regime at the heart of the integration process so as to protect the citizen from any abuse of that power. That is why we need to have the Charter enshrined in the basic law.

We must not shirk the federal question. Who does what, and how? *Qui fait quoi, et comment?* What powers should be exercised at the Union level and which authorities should exercise them?

The Convention will be judged on its success at squaring up to the federal question. Here let us be imaginative for the sake of the future of Europe and not defensive. I hope that the British government, for example, will drop its dreary preoccupation with "policing subsidiarity" when subsidiarity is there to be enjoyed, to enhance the capacity of the Union to act in the interests of its citizens and to be an equally beneficial force in world affairs.

Mr President, the Liberal preference, clearly, is for the Community method - for strong supranational authorities articulating the common interest with ties that bind. We will oppose moves to give the Council more executive power, and thus to weaken the Commission. We will oppose proposals to create, however subtly, a third legislative chamber made up of national parliamentarians, thereby to weaken the European Parliament. We will be promoting proposals to reinforce the role of the regions as a legitimate intermediary between the citizen on the one hand and the supranational government on the other. We will be looking to improve the citizens' access and that of the regions to the European Court of Justice.

As we begin to form a consensus on increasing the powers of the Union in foreign, security and defence policy and in justice and interior affairs, it will be time to erect the scaffolding around the three pillars of Maastricht, and gently demolish them.

While we support the Community method, we also wish to refurbish it. In this context, it is important that the European Council - in whose creation you, with Jean Monnet, played a significant role - should become more integrated and subject to the normal disciplines of the Community regime.

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Mr President, you have likened this Convention to both Philadelphia in 1787 and Messina in 1956. The first was designed to strengthen the independence of the American colonies from Britain. The second showed determination to proceed to build Europe without Britain. Both were right, in their time, to do so.

If I may speak directly to my compatriots in this Convention: let Britain not be excluded this time. Let the United Kingdom shape up to the federal question, and let it come down firmly on the side of those who wish to build together a postnational parliamentary democracy in a more united Europe.
