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Ladies and gentlemen,

Trying to condense a century of European history into three minutes is rather like compressing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony onto an old 78 record. May I invite you to join me in examining Europe from two angles: looking out from the inside and looking in from the outside. We will notice a paradox.

Viewed from the inside, from the point of view of an individual in a member state, Europe does not exist. It is an abstract concept that inspires no emotional attachment despite its increasing hold on our daily life. Viewed from the outside, from the world beyond Europe, Europe does exist but appears hollow, disappointing and inadequate.

If anyone asks me how I would like Europe to look in the 21st century, my answer is that I would like that negative image to disappear. Now is not the time to speak of Europe's final destiny, so I will rein in my supranational passions. There is nothing to be gained by playing the visionary. For the time being, our attitude should be: cooperation where possible, integration where necessary. We should begin by doing what needs to be done. It will eventually become clear where our journey is taking us.

Europe as seen by the general public

The man in the street sees Europe as an abstract concept of no relevance to him. This is a hair-raising fact, because Europe has an ever-increasing impact on his daily life. So there is a real gap in our democracy, caused by the lack of any ties between Brussels and the general public. The European Parliament elections make it abundantly clear that voters think, feel and vote along national not European lines.

Attempts to bring Europe closer to ordinary people are doomed from the start unless we take action to make ordinary people aware of Europe – through both formal and sentimental education, both facts and feelings. Above all, we must abandon the dangerous idea that democracy goes without saying and always will.

It follows that Europe must get actively involved in our children's education in member states. Not excessively, and not to dictate what is taught, as Peter Hain has correctly insisted. But in order to inculcate an awareness of and feeling for democracy, that indispensable and very fragile thing. And Europe must make itself comprehensible. The institutions must be models of clarity, they need a higher profile, they must be more decisive and better controlled. We can achieve this by giving the European Parliament a greater say in all policy areas. We can also achieve it by making the treaties simple and clear. And by building basic social rights into them.

We want to improve and strengthen the Council of Ministers and the European Council, but without weakening the Commission. The essence of the community method is to start from the common interest, while the intergovernmental method in fact puts national interests first. That applies to internal policy and, in the end, foreign policy as well.

From the other viewpoint, outside looking in, Europe does exist. But it is hollow. We have not come up with any means of properly defending the European ideals of solidarity, respect, fundamental rights and the rule of law and championing them on the world stage. Our political influence lags far behind our economic potential. We must find a way to rectify that. Europe must speak with one voice, it must make its presence known and it must defend the European concept of capitalism subject to fundamental social rights.

The High Representative is a first step. Joint initiatives by the High Representative and the Commission could be legitimised by qualified majority voting in the Council. But in the end, a common European policy can only become a reality if the big countries are willing to let it happen.

Thank you.