

COMMUNICATION AND RESEARCH DIRECTORATE
Spokesperson and Press Division
DIRECTION DE LA COMMUNICATION ET DE LA RECHERCHE
Division du Porte-parole et de la Presse
F – 67075 STRASBOURG
Tel : +33/(0)3 88 41 25 60 – Fax : +33/(0)3 88 41 39 11
Email : pressunit@coe.int
Internet : www.coe.int



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Speech by

René van der LINDEN

**on the occasion of his election as
President of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly**

First part of the 2005 Ordinary Session
of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly

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“Daddy, I’m scared, please help”.

These were the last words of two-year-old Ragnar Bang-Ericsson from Norway as he was torn away from his father’s grasp by the force of the tsunami that hit the Thai coast on 26 December.

Over 225,000 victims, very many of them children, perished in this, the greatest natural disaster to hit mankind in our lifetime.

We are shocked by the devastation visited by nature upon human settlements.
We are overwhelmed by the immense grief of those who have lost their loved ones.

We could not help Ragnar and all the others who were swept away, but we can help the millions of victims who survived. The solidarity of the international community and its willingness to help are unprecedented. This tsunami has brought out the best in us, as human beings. The world reacted, united, and it did so with determination.

We should now ensure that this determination continues once the spotlights are turned off and the world’s attention focuses elsewhere. At the same time, let us not forget the millions of people who suffer from exclusion, lack prospects and face extreme poverty.

Similar assistance is needed in many other places, which suffer the consequences of what a recent UN report labelled “the silent Tsunami”. Poverty and disease kill 150,000 children every month. We should demonstrate the same solidarity there too and help people to enjoy the most basic human right of all: to exist, and to exist in dignity.

To honour the memory of the victims, through silent prayer or meditation, may I now invite you to rise and observe a minute’s silence.

Thank you.

Dear colleagues,

I am deeply grateful for the confidence you have shown in electing me President of our Parliamentary Assembly. I will do my utmost to honour your confidence and to carry out my duties and responsibilities in the best possible way.

While my thanks go to all of you, I wish to acknowledge in particular the support I received from my political group, the European People’s Party, and the Netherlands’ delegation, both of which I had the honour to lead until now.

My entire political career has been dedicated to European co-operation. The Members and Observers in this Assembly have been a tremendous inspiration to my work.

I would like specifically to thank Peter Schieder, Lord Russell-Johnston and my other predecessors for their leadership and guidance. I should also like to thank the Secretary General of the Assembly, Mr Bruno Haller, and his staff, as well as all other Council of Europe collaborators for their assistance. I look forward to working closely with all of you in the future. Finally, as a family man, I especially wish to thank my wife and my three children for their continuous loving support.

Dear colleagues, I see three clear priorities ahead of us:

First: strengthening the effectiveness of our Assembly, notably by greater interaction with national parliaments and making our work even more relevant for our citizens;

Second: Developing relations with our partner institutions, the United Nations, the OSCE and in particular the European Union;

Third: Ensuring the success of the Third Summit and the implementation of its decisions.

Allow me to briefly expand on each of these, and in doing so, let me recall what the Council of Europe was set up to do.

In a prophetic radio broadcast in March 1943, during the darkest days of the Second World War, Sir Winston Churchill, who died exactly 40 years ago to the day, foresaw the following:

“There should come into being a Council of Europe to prevent renewed aggression and the preparation of future wars Anyone can see that this Council when created must eventually embrace the whole of Europe and that all the main branches of the European family must some day be partners in it.”

This European family, of 800 million individuals, now exists. Only the citizens of Belarus, suffering under an authoritarian regime, are not yet able to join us.

You, as members of the Parliamentary Assembly, directly represent these 800 million citizens. 800 million people with different cultures, different nationalities, a wide range of political views and religious beliefs, but who are united by common values. Values that are embodied in the Council of Europe's standards and principles. Values that can strengthen social cohesion in our societies and further peace and stability on our continent.

As Chancellor Kohl said in this very same Assembly ten years ago: “dass die Parlamentarische Versammlung des Europarats das “demokratische Gewissen” Europas verkörpert.....Sie stehen für eine Werteordnung, ohne die es keine freiheitliche Zukunft in Europa gibt.“

Indeed, the Council of Europe is first and foremost a community of values, which has, in over half a century, established a unique European “*acquis*”.

More than one third of the Council of Europe's 200 conventions originated in the Assembly. Moreover, our debates very often broke new ground and paved the way, both within the Council of Europe and beyond, for new initiatives and innovative policy.

Our Assembly is also a school of democracy, a training ground for future political leaders.

Parliamentary diplomacy is the active involvement of parliamentarians and parliamentary institutions in situations of political crisis and deadlock. This has increasingly proven to be an essential complement to traditional intergovernmental co-operation and an integral part of international relations.

The preparation of the European Union's Constitutional Treaty, for instance, provides excellent examples of parliamentarians achieving a breakthrough, where governments were blocked. There are many other examples, also involving members of this Assembly.

How then, can we strengthen our effectiveness and make our work even more relevant for our citizens?

In order to make our work better-known and more effective, we should focus more on our core tasks, and carry them out even better.

Democracy, human rights and rule of law were, and remain, the Council of Europe's *raison d'être*. This makes us unique.

Strengthening social cohesion through culture, education and sport is an integral part of these tasks. Racism, xenophobia, anti-semitism and intolerance are, sadly, ever-increasing concerns in our societies. Fighting these phenomena by promoting respect and understanding should therefore continue to figure prominently among our priorities.

Moreover, we should make better use of our Organisation as the best-placed forum for inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.

Furthermore, we should regularly check the relevance of our legal instruments and adapt them when needed, as we are currently doing in the fight against terrorism.

However, many important Conventions have still only been ratified by a limited number of member states. With our double mandate as members of PACE and as national parliamentarians, we should increase our efforts to promote ratification of our key texts. I intend to raise this issue with national delegations.

We should never fail to be self-critical and should prove our added value constantly.

We should explain clearly to our citizens what the Council of Europe's work means to them in their daily life, and we should stand ready to take their concerns into account.

To this end, we should develop closer relations with civil society and in particular with the international NGOs that participate in the work of the Council of Europe.

An effective Assembly should communicate effectively, also with its internal partners.

I shall seek to improve co-operation with our counterparts, the Committee of Ministers, and with our fellow politicians in the Congress. I also wish to work constructively with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and foster contacts with the President of the European Court of Human Rights and with the Commissioner for Human Rights.

In addition, I intend to meet regularly with the Chairpersons of other key Council of Europe bodies, such as the Committee for the Prevention of Torture, the Venice Commission, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), and the North-South Centre.

Annual debates on their activities should be followed by debates in our national parliaments.

As regards my second priority, our relations with our external partners, notably the European Union, are today more important than ever. My conviction, knowing both organisations very well, is that the European Union should make better use of the experience, institutions and instruments of the Council of Europe. The present debate on the creation of an EU Human Rights Agency is a good example. As a member of the Convention which prepared the Constitutional Treaty for Europe, I feel strongly about the importance of the Council of Europe in many areas of concern to the European Union. The European Union's neighbourhood policy could be so much more effective if a better and more systematic use were made of the Council of Europe framework.

The accession of the EU to the European Convention on Human Rights and the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty will link Europe's most advanced institution to Europe's oldest and widest organisation. It will also be a major step towards the creation of a common European legal area.

The recent appointment of an Ambassador to the Council of Europe by the European Commission is already to be warmly welcomed. But, as Foreign Minister Asselborn said during his presentation of the Luxembourg EU Presidency's priorities we do hope we will very soon see the establishment of a permanent Office of the Commission in Strasbourg.

As regards the European Parliament, many of its members are former members of our Assembly. We should benefit from their unique double experience.

There must be no new dividing lines in Europe, nor a return to old East-West antagonisms. There is only one, single, Europe. And here I would quote Jacques Delors, who said: "Pour ma part, je suggère trois objectifs pour cette Grande Europe : un espace de paix active, un cadre pour un développement durable, et enfin un espace de valeurs vécues dans la diversité de nos cultures et de nos traditions".

This Europe is an important part of the international community, as embodied in the United Nations and its specialised agencies, with which we co-operate in many fields. We should strongly promote our values at the global level and stand ready to act as a regional organisation when needed.

With the OSCE, we should emphasise our respective comparative advantages and continue to seek complementarity and reduce all duplication of efforts.

Our Observers offer important input to our work for which we should be very grateful. I look forward to continued close co-operation with them. In the Middle East, new hopes for peace have arisen and we shall make our contribution wherever possible.

Regrettably, one observer state of the Council of Europe - the United States – does not participate in the work of the Assembly. I shall continue the efforts of my predecessors to involve our parliamentary colleagues in Washington in our activities.

We should also stand ready to co-operate with other regions of the world. I intend to build on the work of President Schieder as regards the Pan-African Parliament, and also to develop personal contacts with those fellow parliamentarians elsewhere, who are interested in our experience.

My third priority, the Council of Europe's Third Summit, scheduled to take place in Warsaw on 16 and 17 May this year, is a crucial event for the future of the Council of Europe. It should provide this Organisation with a clear political mission for the years to come. It should provide guidance for more effective co-operation between the different European institutions. I look forward to discussing with the Committee of Ministers the proposals for the Summit that the Assembly will adopt this week, on the basis of the challenging report presented by Mr Kosachev. I have full confidence that the Polish Chairmanship will make this Summit a success.

I call on all national parliaments to hold debates on the Council of Europe's Third Summit and to encourage their governments to follow the recommendations we shall adopt this week. Such political momentum generated at national level is indispensable, if the Summit is to be successful.

Equally important for its success will be the allocation of adequate resources to implement the decisions taken. Zero real growth would starve this organisation. The current budget for this Assembly equals that of my favourite football team, Roda JC, in my province in the Netherlands. It also conveys the impression of a lack of interest in the important role the Council of Europe can and must play. Again, this requires our vigilance as national parliamentarians.

In this, and in carrying out the high office to which you have elected me, I very much count on your support.

The Council of Europe is the oldest European organisation. Age is an asset if the experience gained remains based on the ideals of our founding fathers.

Let us stand up for our ideals and promote them with enthusiasm. The Council of Europe is not an antechamber for other institutions. It is not a technical agency. It is a vital international organisation with a remarkably active and concerned Parliamentary Assembly, and this thanks to so many of you in this chamber here today. This is our capital, our richness, in which we should invest for the peace and welfare of Europe.

We should set the example if we wish others to follow.

Thank you