

Speech of Mr. Van der Linden,
President of the Senate of the Netherlands
on the occasion of
the extra-ordinary meeting of the Association of European Senates,
Gdansk, Poland, 22-23 October 2009

Dear Mr. Marshal, dear Colleagues,

It is a real honour for me to be here on this occasion, at a time when we celebrate a triple event, namely the twenty-year anniversary of fall of the Berlin Wall and of first free parliamentary elections in Central and Eastern Europe. And of course the anniversary of the re-establishment of the Polish Senate. However, as well as being a year of congratulations, 2009 is also year of commemorations. Only a couple of weeks ago, in this very same city of Gdansk, the outbreak of the Second World War was remembered.

In order to celebrate we need necessarily to commemorate. Linking past, present and future is the way forward. We learn crucial lessons from the past, we face critical challenges in the present, which if we don't deal with, become imminent in the future. The common denominator to challenges from past, present and future is Europe. Europe is our best answer. It has always been our best answer.

The European project started out as a peace project. And thanks to this, the citizens of the participating countries have been rewarded with the longest uninterrupted period of peace and prosperity. Twenty years ago, it was our ambition to expand that peace and prosperity. We again were successful. The formula of integration through pooled sovereignty, respecting the different national systems, still attracts the attention of many countries and international organisations worldwide. Europe has set the example.

Common principles of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights have proven to be indispensable conditions for economic growth and for the general well-being of our citizens. They are above all essential prerequisites for peace, security and stability. Institutions, like ours, play a crucial role in safeguarding and promoting these principles by creating the necessary links with our citizens.

We could not have realised today's successes, if it wasn't for cooperation on the European level. The Council of Europe and consequently, the European Union, have fulfilled undeniably crucial roles in the past. And they still do in the present. Think, for example of the Copenhagen-criteria. Because of these criteria, which were the logical outcomes of the principles of the Council of Europe, the enlargement of the EU was enabled. The enlargement of the EU was a success. It has increased the stability of the European continent. However, principles and institutions, alone, cannot change the world – nor Europe. Every generation and every society can only be successful if it also has (besides principles and institutions) ambitions and dreams.

Which brings me to the present. The Herculean task we are faced with today, is the further strengthening of the European cooperation against the many challenges that are currently testing our cooperation. The current financial and economic crisis is testing us to our limits. The new European member states, especially, are facing difficult challenges. A crisis such as the one we are dealing with today, has the potential to overthrow and change balances of power.

Dealing with the crisis might lead to the short-term inclination to pursue national interests. There is a tendency on the national levels to fall back on protectionism. However, even the biggest countries in Europe are too small to defeat this crisis alone. Today, cooperation is key to dealing with crises. Again, a lesson that the past has taught us. After the first and second energy crises, Jacques Delors realised that our markets should integrate so that they could cope with future shocks. This example teaches us that the current crisis should not be used as a tool for breaking links in Europe, quite the contrary, it underlines the need for strengthening our European ties.

The same approach applies to the security challenge. In this day and age, in the short term, it is understandable that we would like to protect our national interests and sovereignty. It is all too easy to forget our common long-term interests, like investing in a stable relationship with our international neighbours, for example.

The goal of European peace and stability demands strong partnerships with non EU-countries. I believe, especially with Russia. A good relation with Russia is of the utmost importance, above all for the neighbouring countries of Russia. We share the responsibility for investing in this relation. If we overlook the long-term, and if we forget the future, it is at our peril.

Because this future brings with it many challenges. Challenges that go beyond the borders of the European Union – even beyond the borders of the European continent. Financial and economic crisis, climate change, rising food prices, poverty, terrorism and a changing security-context; these are just some of the wide-ranging but inter-linked difficulties we are facing and will be facing in the future. All of these challenges test European cooperation.

Our shared ambition is to deal with these challenges. Our past has taught us that we indeed can overcome any problem as long as we work together. Our present forces us to acknowledge the current challenges and those that lie ahead. And our future also requires us to think in terms of cooperation. It is up to us to seek our own ambitions and dreams – for the benefit of European citizens. Jean Monnet once said: 'Europe does not unite states, it unites people'.

Whilst living in the present, and thinking of the future, note that the world will not wait for Europe. It is naïve to think that Europe will not lose international standing if Europe does not -very soon- step up to the plate. The question is, will the Europe of today be able to develop into the Europe of tomorrow and fulfil the important international role?

The international relations have changed. The interdependence of states has increased. Several developments underline these changes. The G8 turned into the G20. Europe played a crucial role in this change. The G20 is now an international important forum that represents the changed environment. It bears shared responsibility for respecting our fundamental values. It is time for Europe to follow that path.

In order for that to happen, two matters, which urgently require the attention of national parliaments need to be resolved. First of all, we need to realise that although the challenges facing us might seem to be externally inflicted, *internally* we are confronted by a moral crisis. We look back to the past and see that the seed of our common Europe is a society of shared moral and values. And without the nec-

essary attention and nurturing that seed will disappear. Growing bigger and stronger and always dealing with challenges, can distract attention from our basic core values, the seed of Europe. To renounce Europe's origins will increase Europe's vulnerability. And it falls upon the national parliaments, in their role representatives of our citizens, to counteract this moral crisis.

The second matter that needs to be resolved is of course institutional reform. I have often posed the question how it can be that the EU and her individual member states are sometimes so critical of *other* countries, criticising other countries because their reform processes are deemed too slow. It is easily forgotten that our *own* reforms are taking more than ten years. We have of course been close to this crucial reform on numerous occasions. As a member of the Convention on the future of Europe, I believed wholeheartedly in the content and the establishment of the Constitutional Treaty. Consequently, the 2007 Treaty of Rome was signed by all our government leaders. Today, we are 99% on our way in completing the needed institutional reform by means of the Treaty of Lisbon. I sincerely hope we will reach a 100% before the first of January 2010.

The implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon will give the national parliaments a stronger European voice in the near future, on both the national and the European levels. It is up to the parliaments to live up to the expectations of the Treaty of Lisbon.

Dear Colleagues, today we gathered to celebrate democracy in Europe twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. There is no better reason to celebrate. We can look back on impressive results. But celebrating the past also means taking on a responsibility for the future. Our common future is Europe. Europe should never be taken for granted. The success of the European project depended on the continuous efforts of the people who believed in one Europe. If we still share their ambition now and in the future, it is our task to continuously fight for a common Europe. And as representatives of our citizens it is our job to prevent any and every neglect of Europe.

I leave you with a quote from Nietzsche: "The future influences the present just as much as the past".

Thank you.