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"New role of national Parliaments under the Lisbon Treaty"

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Conference organised by the C.E.P.C, Real Instituto Elcano and Fundación Manuel Giménez Abad

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It's a great privilege to participate in this conference, and I very much welcome your initiative to discuss the new role of national Parliaments under the Lisbon Treaty, and what this means in practical terms for the Spanish Parliament;

Last May, I have had the pleasure to meet the Chairman of the joint EU Committee of your Parliament, Mr Arias Canete, as well as the President of the Senate, Mr Rojo, and I am delighted to continue today the dialogue with the different colleagues from the Cortes Generales present at this conference, and to listen to your different views and questions.

Let me underline that the Commission very much welcomes the new role given to national Parliaments under the Treaty of Lisbon, and specifically the new Protocol on the subsidiarity check. The new Treaty provisions encourage the Parliaments and the EU institutions to work together and to discuss their respective goals and challenges, and this is exactly what the Commission has been advocating for many years now.

As you know, within the current Commission, I have a specific responsibility for relations with the national Parliaments.

But it was already in 2006 that the Commission put the issue of national Parliaments high on its political agenda, considerably strengthening its relations with national Parliaments at all levels, and thus anticipating the greater role foreseen for national Parliaments under the new Treaty; this resulted in a new, informal dialogue with national Parliaments, commonly referred to as the "political dialogue", or you may know it as the "Barroso initiative".

The Commission's idea was to transmit directly to national Parliaments its new proposals and consultation papers, and to invite them to react, so as to improve the process of policy formulation and to involve national Parliaments more closely in European affairs;

But not only this: The Commission also committed itself to reply to all opinions received by national Parliaments, which raise comments, criticism or simply questions, and to take the views expressed by national Parliaments into account.

Ever since the dialogue has been considerably intensified: until now, the Commission has received almost 830 opinions from 36 Chambers [out of 40] of 26 Member States, with a clear upward trend.

I am very glad to see that the Spanish Parliament has also entered into this direct dialogue with the Commission; it was an important moment to receive the first Spanish opinion on our proposal concerning the Agency for the operational management of large-scale IT systems in the area of freedom, security and justice; the Spanish Parliament will shortly receive our reply, which is currently being finalised and translated, and which explains in detail why the Commission is convinced that it would be better to entrust the management of the large scale IT systems to a dedicated Agency, rather than to the Frontex Agency, as suggested by the Spanish Parliament.

But more than statistics, what should be remembered is that this major political initiative was an expression of the Commission's drive for a new culture in European inter-institutional affairs.

Our direct cooperation is important for a simple reason: we deal with the future of the same citizens. A positive result of our cooperation could improve Europeans' trust in democracy.

We need to consider that positive relations between the Commission and national Parliaments mean a democratic improvement. We are part of the same effort to reinforce democracy in Europe.

First of all, we have to create and maintain a climate of openness, mutual respect, and effective co-operation.

The Commission sees itself as a “facilitator” of the parliamentary search for information, and for cooperation between parliaments.

In our opinion, the presence in Brussels of the representatives of the national Parliaments is extremely useful; it creates an important network for cooperation between national Parliaments, the European Parliament and the Commission; it is important for us to have them as contact points on the spot, and I believe it is important for you to have someone close to the EU institutions, able to follow the decision making process and to provide you with information "from the sources"; we therefore very much welcome that a representative of the Cortes Generales is also present and working in Brussels.

Of course I am aware that the network of national Parliament representatives in Brussels is currently the platform where the main coordination efforts between national Parliaments are taking place as for the application of the Protocol on subsidiarity check.

The Commission fully trusts that national Parliaments will use this new mechanism in a constructive way, and as you know, we have always seen the subsidiarity check mechanism as an opportunity, rather than as a risk.

The Commission was ready to implement this new Treaty mechanism as of the day the Lisbon Treaty entered into force.

Immediately after the entry into function of the new College beginning of February 2010, the Commission started sending to national Parliaments draft legislative proposals falling under the subsidiarity check mechanism.

Until now the Commission has sent 57 proposals to national Parliaments and received 97 opinions. 18 of these opinions were negative; so far, the so-called yellow or orange card, have not been triggered;

Most of the negative opinions from national Parliaments referred to our proposals on Seasonal workers and the Deposit guarantee scheme; we are now in the process of carefully analysing these opinions, which we will take into account and to which we will reply, in any case as part of the political dialogue.

The recent examples have confirmed what I think everybody knew before: that the 8 weeks deadline is relatively short, that the thresholds are rather difficult to reach and that most of the comments we receive from national Parliaments actually refer to the content of our proposals, rather than to subsidiarity issues.

This is why we think it is so important to continue and to intensify our "political dialogue", which enables national Parliaments to share with us their comments on all Commission documents, be they of legislative or non legislative nature, and on all aspects, including content, legal base, proportionality - not only subsidiarity.

In fact, for us the subsidiarity control mechanism has to be seen as only a part of our broader political relationship with national Parliaments. We definitely do not want our relations to be reduced to subsidiarity control, as important as this may be.

Secondly, we need political contact and debate. I intend to visit all 40 Chambers in the course of the current mandate, and my colleagues are also intensifying their contacts with national Parliaments, meeting as many national Parliaments as they can to present the Commission's positions and to discuss with national Parli

We of course also welcome and encourage any visit of national Parliaments to Brussels and the EU institutions; and let's also not forget the numerous constructive contacts we have established at services level and the participation of national Parliaments in our public consultations.

Last but not least, the Commission has always been in favour of giving greater value to inter-parliamentary cooperation, be it within the COSAC framework, or through the European Parliament.

National Parliaments have now entered a sort of "reflection period" in particular as regards cooperation in the context of the subsidiarity control mechanism.

Discussions will continue in a few days at the COSAC meeting, with the participation of President Barroso and President Van Rompuy.

From my point of view, cooperation between national Parliaments and the Commission could have a clear added value in the fields where national Parliaments have a greater say:

- the evaluation of Eurojust's activities and in the scrutiny of Europol;
- scrutiny of the Common Security and Defence Policy, after the European Security and Defence Assembly will have been wound down in June 2011;
- the Commission's Work Programme;
- the Europe 2020 strategy; European economic governance, and more specifically budgetary questions;

In this context, I cannot conclude my intervention without saying a few words on two of the issues on which I think there is great opportunity for a closer cooperation between national Parliaments and the Commission: the EU 2020 Strategy and economic governance more generally; and the EU's budget review.

On Europe 2020, sound public finance - and restoring confidence amongst our citizens and the markets - are a means to an end: growth for jobs. This must be our overarching priority. It is at the core of the Europe 2020 strategy. Let me know give you an overview of where we stand.

The Europe 2020 strategy was launched by Heads of States last June, now is time to work together- Member States, European Institutions, but also national parliaments, regional and local level, social partners- on its implementation. Ownership at all levels is a key element for success.

I would like to particularly highlight the key role of national Parliaments in the Europe 2020 strategy. In this context, it is important that you fully engage with your national government in the preparation of your National Reform Programme. I strongly welcome the fact that many national Parliaments have already been closely involved in drafting the NRP.

Indeed, a consensus at national level on the reform programme is essential, even more so because some reforms will not be easy to implement, but nevertheless necessary. Last but not least, your role in raising ownership at national level is essential to close the delivery gap that existed under the Lisbon strategy.

As you know, the European Semester for policy coordination is now in place and provides a framework for an integrated and enhanced surveillance cycle.

I would like to underline once more that the European Semester fully respects the prerogatives of national Parliaments, and that Member States will not be asked to submit their draft budgets to the European Commission before they are discussed in the national Parliament.

As set out in the Commission proposal, Member States would submit: (i) an update of the fiscal plans for the current year; (ii) a macroeconomic scenario underpinning budgetary projections; (iii) concrete indications on plans for the following budget; (iv) a description of the envisaged policies; and medium-term budgetary projections for main government variables.

Let me conclude by underlining that the Europe 2020 strategy is about all of us moving in the same direction, and bringing added value by supporting each other through common actions and instruments. This is the only way to move Europe 2020 forward and on the right path for our future growth that needs to be smart, sustainable and inclusive.

And to deliver on Europe 2020 strategy, we must use all our instruments at our disposal. And this includes the EU budget.

The European Commission has just this week published its communication on the budget review: Lessons learnt for tomorrow's budget.

This is the fruit of an open debate without taboos, notably about the principles to underpin the future EU budget beyond 2013. I would like to encourage the Cortes Generales to participate actively in the debate.

Our objective is to achieve a European budget that is up to the challenges we are facing collectively, not necessarily through increased expenditure, but by focussing on the right priorities, the added value, results and the quality of European spending. On the resource side, it is high time to promote a fair and transparent system that is understood by citizens.

The EU budget can make its own contribution at a time of intense pressure on public spending – by ensuring that we have the maximum impact from every Euro spent, and that we only spend at EU level where this is better value than at national level. We must help deliver key policy priorities for European citizens, programmes that have a real positive impact.

Our number one priority: smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Pooling our resources together on key issues will help Member States save money and will avoid duplications. For example, costly research and innovation investment as well as key transnational infrastructures should be financed at EU level.

Cohesion policy will remain the best expression of European solidarity – but it will also give best value if it supports the policy priorities common to the whole of Europe. This is in any event the best way to reduce the gap between poorer and richer regions. So funds should become a way to deliver on the Europe 2020 targets; and Europe 2020 objectives must be translated into investment priorities in line with national reform programmes.

The Commission suggests creating a "development and investment partnership contract" based on a common strategic framework. The framework would outline an investment strategy on which Member States would present their development strategy addressing the priorities of EU 2020. This would consist of a development and investment partnership contract between each Member State and the Commission reflecting the commitments of partners at national and regional level.

A final word on own resources – firstly let me dispel any misunderstanding: the debate is about finding the right mix of resources for the Union, not to find additional resources. It is about increasing the transparency of how the EU is funded and thus make it more understandable for the ordinary citizen. The Commission therefore puts forward the option of reducing Member States' contributions by progressively introducing one or several new own resources as a replacement.

Possible candidates for new own resources could be a share of a financial transaction or financial activities tax, auctioning of green house gas emission allowances, an EU charge related to air transport, a separate EU VAT rate, a share of an EU energy tax or of an EU corporate income tax. This is now open for discussion.

I have outlined the context for our relations, and the challenging issues ahead of us. I very much welcome the interest demonstrated by the Cortes in European affairs, and I look forward to a close involvement in the decisive debates now taking place in Europe.

We will do everything we can to support the Cortes Generales in this respect and this conference is an excellent occasion to have a first discussion on how a more intensive cooperation could look like in the future.

Thank you for your attention.