



LET'S TALK ABOUT EUROPE

Margot Wallström

Fifty-one years ago, in Rome, the leaders of six countries —Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands— signed a treaty that laid the foundation for the European Economic Community (EEC). This was a brand new experiment in international cooperation. It was more than just a free trade area: it was a political and economic community in which governments agreed to take collective decisions. They set up institutions to help them do this job: the European Commission to put forward proposals and to promote the common European interest; the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers to share the job of decision-making and law-making; the Court of Justice to enforce those laws.

Since that day in March 1957, Europe has changed almost beyond recognition. It is no longer divided between East and West. Former dictatorships and Communist countries have become vibrant democracies with thriving market economies. Standards of living have risen beyond anything our grandparents could have imagined.

The EEC has become the European Union (EU). It has grown from six to 27 members, embracing a wide variety of cultures, traditions and languages. It has become the world's biggest trading bloc and the biggest donor of aid to the developing world. It has also become increasingly complex, and has to deal with a vast range of issues —from a cleaner environment to safer toys, from culture to agriculture and from fighting famine in Africa to counting codfish in the Baltic Sea.

What's more, Europe today faces new opportunities and new challenges: globalisation; climate change; international crime and terrorism; migration —to name but a few. We need skilled immigrants to contribute to our workforce— which at present is shrinking. We need to cut our greenhouse gas emissions to limit Europe's contribution to climate change. We need to become more energy efficient, to help preserve Earth's limited resources and to become

less dependent on imported fossil fuels. European businesses need to stay competitive in the global market place. Our young people need good education and training for new jobs that require new skills.

These issues are so complex, and so globally inter-linked, that no individual country, not even the most powerful, can tackle them on its own. *Working together* is the only solution. That's what the European Union is all about. We put our heads together and take collective decisions. We pool our resources and exert, exponentially, our collective strength. We adopt policies that are in our collective interest —but we also aim to ensure that they are in the interests of the human race and planet earth.

Of course, we don't always succeed. Our decision-making system is complex and it's not easy to get 27 countries to agree. We don't act as effectively as we should and we don't yet speak with a single international voice. Europe needs a better way of working —and that's the purpose of the new Treaty which EU leaders signed in December 2007 in Lisbon. If all 27 countries ratify this Treaty, it will come into force next year.

The Lisbon Treaty will give us a simpler system for taking decisions on a number of points by majority voting rather than having to get unanimous agreement among us. It will make the EU more transparent by obliging the Council of Ministers to debate in public when they are discussing proposals for new European laws. It will make Europe more united on the world stage by appointing a High Representative for the Union in Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who will also be a Vice-President of the Commission.

Last but not least, it will give the European Parliament, national parliaments and EU citizens a greater say in European Union decision-making. Any EU citizen who can gather a million signatures from a number of EU countries will be able to petition the Commission to launch a new policy. It might seem a very big number, but it is

actually a very tiny percentage of the EU's 500 million population. Moreover, the right to petition puts real power in the hands of citizens. So the Lisbon Treaty will help make the EU more democratic.

But democracy is not just about petitions and votes. It also requires a properly informed public debate. People have the right to know what the EU is doing, or planning to do, and why. At present, seven out of ten citizens say that they know very little about the EU. The European Commission is making a great effort to change that situation by providing clear and accurate information via TV, radio, newspapers and the internet.

To help radio and TV to get the information across, the Commission will support trans-European networks of broadcasters, which bring together audiences in different European countries and produce programmes focusing on European issues. One example: in December 2007 the Commission signed a five-year contract with a consortium of radio stations to set up a European radio network. This was launched on 1 April 2008 and initially brings together more than 16 radio stations in 13 EU countries, broadcasting in 10 languages. Hopefully, in 5 years time its coverage will extend to all Member States and official languages.

When it comes to the internet, our website provides masses of information for the general public as well as for experts. In fact, it's the biggest multilingual website in the world, containing material in all 23 official languages of the EU. You can find it by going to www.europa.eu —and we are working to make the site easier to navigate, more user-friendly and more interactive. We are also making a real effort to explain things in plain language and not in the jargon of the Brussels institutions.

But I don't want the EU institutions simply to provide information. I also want them to *listen* to people. Before proposing new EU laws and policies, the European Commission needs to find out the concerns and expectations of people from all walks of life. That's why we conduct regular opinion polls and we have been experimenting with different forms of citizens' consultations in every EU country. We believe that the EU's agenda should reflect the citizens' priorities —and that the people should discuss together what action the EU needs to take.

Since the European Union is a trans-national democracy, we really need a *trans-national debate*, with people from all EU countries exchanging ideas and coming to understand each other's viewpoints. That's why, in 2005, the Commission launched its «Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate». This experimented with new ways of connecting people —locally, nationally and across borders— and enabling them to have an informed debate about European issues.

For example, we helped finance a series of «European citizens' projects» involving people from all EU countries. These projects combined online and face-to-face

meetings, deliberative consultation and polling at national and European level. Some 40 000 citizens took part by actually attending events. Another 1.5 million people were involved via the internet.

Besides these projects, «Citizens' Forums» were held in most EU countries. The kick-off event took place in Vienna, Austria, in December 2005, followed by 37 meetings in 2006 in ten other countries (Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Sweden). Thousands of people attended these meetings, and many others were reached through radio and TV.

The Commission is now co-funding a series of 58 local projects aimed primarily at women and young people —whose particular interests and concerns often get overlooked in the debates about EU policies. These projects are focusing on topics like social inclusion, the European single market, food safety and climate change.

However, projects of this kind can reach only a relatively small number of people. Perhaps the best medium for getting a cross-border debate going among a large number of people —especially among younger people— is the internet. In 2006 the European Commission launched a website called «Debate Europe» where people from all over the world are now debating —in 24 languages!— hot issues: the future of the EU; climate change and the way Europe uses energy; the attitudes and beliefs of different ethnic and cultural groups within European society... If you would like to join the discussion, go to www.europa.eu/debateeurope

In 2007, the Commission launched its own site on YouTube. It's called «EU Tube», and here you can watch and comment on a wide range of video clips about European affairs. Just go to <http://www.youtube.com/eutube>

But democratic debate is not just for young and computer-literate people. It's for everyone —and there must be local places where you can get information, discuss the issues and make your views heard. That's why the Commission has offices in each EU country— not only in the capital but also in other cities. You can find the address of the Commission office nearest you by going to http://ec.europa.eu/represent_en.htm

In 2007, the Commission and the European Parliament began creating what we call «European public spaces» in the premises we share in some capital cities —starting with Tallinn, Dublin and Madrid. These «spaces» are areas where people can walk in off the street and find information and documentation about the EU, see exhibitions and films, attend lectures or take part in debates and seminars on European issues.

We also aim to improve our communication efforts by adopting a more focused approach. If we try to talk about everything with everyone all the time, we will achieve nothing. To be effective, we need to focus on a limited

number of important issues and decide when to discuss what with whom. For 2008, the EU institutions have agreed to focus their joint efforts on three priority topics: the Lisbon treaty, climate change (including energy policy) and the European Year of Inter-cultural Dialogue.

But the EU institutions cannot do the communication job alone. The EU today has nearly 500 million citizens. To get a really informed and lively debate going among even a tenth of these people would require far more staff and money than the institutions have available. To do the job properly will take a concerted effort not only by «Brussels» but also by all the national governments of the EU. We have to work *together*. That is the central message of the Commission's recent paper *Communicating Europe in Partnership*, in which we propose a formal agreement to work together on a common communication agenda, with a common annual work plan (http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2007/com2007_0568en01.pdf).

To some extent, this is already happening. With a number of governments the Commission has already established «management partnerships». These are practical arrangements under which the government, the European Parliament and the Commission agree on a set of national and regional communication activities. The Commission finances them and a government-appointed body ensures that they are carried out properly. Management partnerships are already up and running in Germany, Slovenia and Hungary. This year, five more are likely to be started up—in Austria, Belgium, Italy, Portugal and France.

Another excellent form of cooperation between governments and EU institutions is the «Back to School» initiative, whereby hundreds of European Union officials from the country currently holding the EU Presidency go back home to visit their old school and to talk to the students there about European affairs.

This scheme started under the German Presidency early last year, and has carried on since then. In autumn 2007, under the Portuguese Presidency, 235 officials visited more than 200 schools all over Portugal. The Slovenian and French presidencies in their turn will carry the scheme forward in 2008. Even countries not holding the Presidency are beginning to take part e.g. The Netherlands.

Schools are, of course, the obvious place in which to start learning about Europe. Education about EU affairs should be part of the curriculum in every member country. As I see it, this is the right of citizens: it is the right of young students to know what the European Union is, what it's for, how it works and what it does. This is not propaganda: it's about providing the basic information to enable people to form their own opinions.

Governments are responsible for national education, but the Commission is willing to help by providing information and by bringing together teachers and education authorities from different countries to

exchange best practice and perhaps to design courses and develop educational material. The Commission's «Spring Day for Europe» initiative also helps young people to gain an awareness of European issues and to integrate them into their study programme.

If educators have an important role to play, so do the mass media. In my view, they have a solemn responsibility to explain how the European Union affects people's daily lives and to do so in a factual, unbiased way.

National political leaders must have the courage to defend what they are doing together at the European level. They need to stand up and say to their electorates «I believe in the European project and the idea of European cooperation. It has its flaws and its shortcomings, and we make mistakes and not everything is perfect, but I stand up for the European Union and the whole principle of collective decision-making for the common good».

It is not only EU institutions and national governments that have a responsibility for communicating on EU affairs. Regional and local authorities must play their part too—for example, by holding local meetings (in schools, town halls and so on) to inform and consult local people. After all, decisions taken in Brussels have an impact on life in your local community. In my country, Sweden, for example, around half of the issues discussed by local councils have some kind of link to European policies or have their origin in EU law.

However, many local politicians do not know what this link looks like or in what way a particular piece of EU legislation affects life locally. I am counting on the EU's Committee of the Regions to help them. This body is made up of representatives of regional and local authorities (the mayors of large cities, for example), and it meets regularly in Brussels to discuss EU proposals. It is ideally placed to act as a communication bridge between the central policy-makers and local councils.

Above all, the debate we are trying to generate—locally, nationally and across borders—must focus people's minds on the important question of *what Europe stands for*. What values and goals do we share? What sort of a world do we want our children and our grand-children to inherit? Being European means little unless we are prepared to take a stand in defence of the things we value most dearly. As the American politician Alexander Hamilton said 200 years ago, «Those who stand for nothing fall for anything».

So, what do we stand for as Europeans? The Lisbon Treaty has its own answer to that question. Article 2 says:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism,

non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

Article 3 of the Treaty goes on to list the EU's aims: to promote peace, European values and the well-being of its peoples; to create an area of freedom, security and justice; to work for sustainable development; to promote social justice and protection, and solidarity between the generations; to safeguard Europe's cultural heritage.

The concept of «sustainable development» mentioned in the Treaty means, essentially, delivering prosperity while protecting the environment and promoting social justice. We deliver prosperity by being innovative and creative in order to generate a dynamic economy with more and better jobs. We protect the environment by making a better use of limited resources and by considering the effects that our actions could have on natural ecosystems. The biggest environmental challenge of all is, of course, climate change and the EU is leading global efforts to tackle it. We are committed to cutting our greenhouse gas emissions by 20% by 2020 —and we will make even deeper cuts if other major players do likewise.

We promote social justice by taking active steps to combat social exclusion and discrimination; by integrating immigrants into mainstream society; by modernising our health care and pension systems to make them sustainable, so that future generations can enjoy their benefits.

That's the kind of Europe I want to help build. How about you? I would encourage you to discuss the question with friends and colleagues, with people who share your concerns and with citizens of other European Union countries.

Even if we can all agree on our collective aims, it will probably be impossible to reach complete consensus on the policies we need in order to achieve those aims. Different political parties have different political visions —and, in the end, each of us has to make a choice between those

competing visions. Representative democracy at national level means we each vote for the party that best represents our choice, and the winning party (or coalition of parties) forms a government and rolls out a legislative programme.

At EU level, it's slightly different. Every five years we have the chance to elect the members of the European Parliament. There is no «winning party» that forms a government, but the balance of parties affects the way the Parliament amends the proposals that come from the Commission over the following five years. The next European Parliament elections will be held in June 2009: don't miss your chance to vote!

I am optimistic about the future of Europe because I have great faith in the current generation of young Europeans. Whenever I meet groups of students in schools and colleges around Europe I am impressed by the breadth of their vision, their grasp of the issues facing this continent and the sharpness of their questions.

Moreover, to the young generation, the borders between countries are not the most important thing. They have cross-border conversations on the internet. They travel, study, make friends and fall in love in other countries. They enjoy discovering each other's languages and cultures. They are the future of Europe —and Europe is their future. I have faith that they will make a reality of the concept I am deeply committed to: trans-national communication for a trans-national democracy. Communication understood as a genuine conversation between the citizens of Europe about what they want to do together.

This is not about «selling» the European Union. It is not about persuading people to love EU policies. It is about empowering citizens to set the agenda —to decide the destination and direction of our shared journey. Communicating Europe is not about getting the people «on board»: it's about putting them in the driving seat, which is their rightful place.

