

Introductory address

Meeting with the Members of the European Affairs Committees of the Eerste and Tweede Kamers of the Dutch Parliament

**The Hague, 21 April 2005
Binnenhof**

Key points :

- **Ratification of the European Constitution**
- **Strengthening of our relations with the National Parliaments as a priority**
- **How to develop a new culture**
- **Principles for action :**
 - **facilitator**
 - **need of a political contact and debate**
 - **need to publicise our co-operation**
- **Time to act :**
 - **continuous and open dialogue**
 - **concrete networking**
 - **connecting with people and their political representatives**

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By M. Wallström**

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Chairmen,
Honourable Members,

It is my pleasure and honour to be here today, and to meet both your committees which have a long and important tradition of the European work. I know that Netherlands has been engaged in a fundamental political debate on the **ratification of the European Constitution**.

In a few weeks the Dutch people will vote. It will be very important for your country, but also for all other Member States and all Europe's citizens. You can really help our Constitution enter into force and send a signal to others.

I do not want to open a large debate on the Constitution here and now, but I would like to clarify one thing. **There is no plan B**. The ratification procedure has started – and it should be completed without interference. We **cannot** and **should not** speculate about what **might** happen, if we get this or that result in this or that country.

Every referendum counts and **every parliamentary procedure counts**. We have to respect – and clearly **show** that respect – of the different procedures chosen by the different Member States. And we should not prejudge the outcome **anywhere**. That would be **disrespectful** to the **democratic process**. And it would undermine the citizens' right to have **their say**.

But let me get back to what I originally was supposed to talk to you:

The Strengthening of our relations with the National Parliaments.

This is not the first time that a Commissioner has visited a National Parliament. It is however the first time that the Commission launches a clear strategy of co-operation in the framework of the **existing** Treaty and of the **future** European Constitution.

Within the Barroso Commission I have a specific responsibility for relations with the National Parliaments. An administrative structure has been created and the Commission has already discussed my views on this issue. To anticipate the greater role foreseen for the National Parliaments within the Constitution, this Commission has set as an important priority to **strengthening our relations with the National Parliaments**.

In other words, the Commission wants to make its claims of **better governance** and a **more democratic system** meaningful. We want to create the conditions to **work together**.

For this reason, we need to deal with two major issues:

- how to develop **a new culture** of political relations between the Commission and the National Parliaments

- how to develop **the concrete practice** for these relations.

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A new culture

We need a **new culture**. I warmly welcome the articles of the **European Constitution which oblige** the Parliaments and the Commission **to work together** and to discuss their differences.

Until now, the Treaties created a “frontier” between the European Institutions and the National Parliaments. The Commission had to deal with governments, who in turn dealt with internal problems, including parliamentary issues.

This separation was essentially formalistic and I think it’s time for it to end! As Mr Amato said: **the European Union has to know national Constitutions!** We have to learn that our co-operation is important for a simple reason: we deal with the **future of the same citizens**.

It would be a disaster if different attitudes damaged the expectations of citizens: a negative result will affect European and national Institutions – put simply, **our democracy**. On the other hand, a positive result could **improve Europeans’ faith in democracy**.

We need to consider that the possibility of positive relations between us – the National Parliaments and the Commission – is a **democratic improvement**. We need this new culture: we are part of the same effort to reinforce democracy in Europe!

Principles for action

Nevertheless, **culture is not enough**: we need **principles for action**. First of all, we must create a climate of **openness, mutual respect, and effective co-operation**.

- Firstly, the Commission should be a “**facilitator**” of the parliamentary search for information, for exchange of information and for co-operation.

In my opinion, the presence in Brussels of the representatives of the National Parliaments is a very good idea; it creates an important network for co-operation between the National Parliaments, the European Parliament and the Commission. We have already achieved results, through common discussion on serious political and legislative issues (REACH, on control of risks in the area of chemistry, Lisbon Strategy and so on).

I also think that the construction of an informatics tool for the exchange of information and good practices should be developed: we are ready to help. As a matter of fact, I have already started some of these discussions informally with your civil servants: on Monday this week, I attended the annual meeting of the national parliaments' liaison officers at the European Parliament in Brussels.

[At that meeting, I learned that there are now 20 out of the 25 Member States' parliaments that have permanent representatives posted in Brussels! One of them from this parliament. I think that it

excellent – and I'm convinced it helps both the national parliaments and the EU institutions to do a better job.]

- Secondly, we need **political contact and debate**. I intend to visit all 25 Parliaments, to discuss not only procedure, but also the European Constitution, and other **concrete political issues**.
 - I have already asked my colleagues to visit the National Parliaments to answer specific questions in their competences.
 - I'll participate more in the activities of COSAC. I met COSAC's delegation chairmen in February.
 - We are ready to give greater value to inter-parliamentary cooperation between the National Parliaments and the European Parliament, which is a real success story, despite quite a difficult start.
- Thirdly, we need to **publicise our co-operation**; the Commission has undertaken to publish a newsletter in this regard. I think this is a good instrument for communication between national and European parliamentarians and the Commission – and between our administrations. We should go further, and I intend to exploit my responsibility in the field of communication to improve information on our common job. We should give our common initiatives enough political consideration so that effective communications can be developed for them.

It's time to act!

I started this intervention with saying that every referendum counts and that every parliamentary procedure counts. That prejudging the outcome

is disrespectful to the democratic process and undermines the citizens' right to have their say.

Having said that, it becomes incredibly clear that we **cannot anticipate the Constitution**. We must **respect the ratification procedures** in the Member States. Applying the Constitution in advance is something we simply **cannot** and **will not** do.

But that does not mean that we have to **wait** for the final approval of the Constitution to **work together**. It does not mean that the Commission can't have good and fruitful relations with the national parliaments. And as a matter of fact, we already now has responsibilities under the Amsterdam Treaty and its Protocol on National Parliaments.

This is why my first communication to the Commission concerned relations between the Commission and the National Parliaments. Commissioners reacted in a very stimulating way, and the Commission fully endorsed my proposals.

But we should not forget that this is a **joint exercise**, with both camps providing both supply and demand, acting in the interest of European citizens. I expect **the National Parliaments to give indications** on the best ways to structure these relations and to develop this new culture. And this is the main reason why I am here today – to **listen to you!**

Our common engagement is even more important in the **long term perspective**. We should define the principles of the future co-operation. We need to prepare seriously our discussions, but I think that **three key items** should be addressed. And that is what I informed the

Commissioners of when I presented my intentions for our relations with the national parliaments:

1. **Mutual service – a continuous and open dialogue:** we are interested in and depending on each others' views and possibilities in order to perform our respective tasks in an **efficient, open and transparent** manner;
2. **Concrete networking:** we should not be afraid to make **full use** of each others' expertise at political as well as administrative level, always in line with current Treaties and constitutions;
3. **Connecting with people and their elected representatives:** a greater voice to parliaments is a greater voice to Europe's citizens!

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After all, what I believe it all comes down to is the following:

to be more relevant to citizen's concerns, the Commission and the other EU institutions must be able to explain how we touch upon *day-to-day* issues; how we work; the values we stand for; and the role we play in the world.

For that reason, the EU institutions need a wide range of “natural partners” in the Member States – “natural partners” in the debate on the benefits of Europe. We **need** the National Parliaments to play an active role.

European institutions **at large** need to work better together; and here I of course include the National Parliaments. And we **must be seen** to work better together. The spirit of co-operation is something that must be **in the walls** of our respective institutions. We must increase the shared ownership of the European project. How can we do that **without** connecting with people and their elected representatives?

Please correct me if you think I'm wrong, but I have the feeling that for the moment, the priority for many national MPs and political establishments is domestic issues, and European issues are often seen as foreign, rather than domestic.

But isn't it true that EU affairs are nothing else than "multinational domestic policy"? Domestic policy in 25 countries at the same time?!

I believe that an active interest and participation in the European debate by **more** national MPs will once and for all help to firmly anchor European issues in the national political parties – and in national and local political traditions. In this way European issues get a natural place on the national and local political agendas.

I think this is the **big** task that lies ahead of us – to change the way people look at the EU and EU affairs. And consequently and even **more importantly**, the way people **participate** in the EU and in EU affairs.

I firmly believe that once people have started seeing it as "multinational domestic policy", then we have come very far. And then there will be a natural interest – even the feeling of a need – to **participate actively**.

And for that we need each other – we need you as Members of Parliament.

Let us discuss this in the coming days and weeks and try to find positive, useful solutions. Let us start discussing directly; already now. Because in this way, I think that we together will help Europe's democracy be more appreciated by our citizens.

Thank you.