

Dear Prime Ministers,  
Dear Commissioners,  
Dear Party leaders,  
Dear Friends,  
Chères Amies, Chers Amis,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you at this 29<sup>th</sup> ELDR Congress, the second one to take place in Stockholm, thirteen years after a first Stockholm congress which brought us together from 5 till 7 July 1995. Much has changed since, I'll come back to that, but what has not changed all through the years, is the generosity of our Swedish Host Parties, the Centre Party led by Maud Olofsson, and the Folkpartiet, led by Jan Björklund. Not content to host two congresses in less than fifteen years, you have indeed hosted a number of Council and Bureau meetings both of LI and ELDR, and we are most grateful for that and look forward to enjoy your generous hospitality.

As I said, Ladies and Gentlemen, much has changed since 1995, for the better and for the worse. We Liberals have mainly experienced changes for the better. Liberal Prime Ministers for instance, were an unknown species way back then. We had precious few government ministers and even less commissioners. Today, we count six prime ministers, five within and one outside the Union, and participate in several more governments all over the Union and beyond. We are proud that about one third of the Commissioners are self avowed liberals. We owe part of this success to changes in mentality and political culture that made people more receptive and responsive to liberal ideas or more rightly, to liberal approaches and attitudes. But what the French so beautifully call 'l'air du temps' (the spirit of the time) doesn't fully account for the success of liberal parties and politicians.

It was hard work, Ladies and Gentlemen, relentless hard work, that made us successful. That and a newly won self confidence. Many of our member parties have grown stronger and more professional since 1995. We conduct better campaigns, we devise and implement better policies, we have grown better at communicating, we often have strengthened our party structures, making sure that we have operating party branches at local, regional and national level. None of this is sexy or exciting, on the contrary. It is even rather boring, but the sustainability of our parties and thus of our ideas, depends for a large degree on the strength of the supporting party structures. Besides hard work, I mentioned self confidence as another important factor of success.

For decades, various shades of socialism had been widely prevalent and to be a liberal was like belonging to a political species on the path to extinction. So much so, that I once heard an Italian politician, who since then has joined Berlusconi, say that a liberal party with more than 5% of the votes should not be trusted. Surely, to gain over 5% of the votes, one must have compromised one's ideals and principles. Only when we freed ourselves from all these delusions, were we able to gain broad support. It is in politics like in love, why should anyone love us, if we don't love ourselves? But as another French saying goes: « en politique et en amour, ne dites jamais jamais; ne dites jamais toujours. » At last year's Congress in Berlin, the immediate future looked bright. A new Treaty was about to be adopted; economic growth was steady in Europe and amazing in Asia; the world seemed appeased.

What a difference a year makes. This summer Russia invaded Georgia and only retreated under strong pressure from the EU. This summer the American government nationalised several banks and the world's largest insurance company, but allowed Lehman Brothers to go bust, triggering an immediate reaction all over the world. Our governments had to develop hasty rescue plans, tried first to act on their own but quickly realised that the magnitude of the looming crisis required concerted action at EU level. Such action has now been set into motion.

Les crises que nous venons de vivre, Mesdames et messieurs, ont douloureusement révélé les faiblesses institutionnelles de l'Union. La crise géorgienne a révélé, me semble-t-il, tous les inconvénients de ce que j'appellerais une politique étrangère à intermittence. J'ai dû me rendre à l'évidence, nous avons absolument besoin d'un responsable permanent qui chapeaute toute la politique étrangère de l'Union, qui dispose d'un budget convenable, qui a des adjoints en nombre suffisant, et qui peut faire appel à une véritable diplomatie européenne. La présidence française a pallié à ces insuffisances, de façon parfois tout à fait cavalière, mais qu'aurions-nous fait sans elle ?

And how would we have faced the financial crisis if again, the French Presidency hadn't taken the lead, succeeding only after several attempts, and taking inspiration from, of all persons, the British Prime Minister? All through these episodes, I painfully missed the voice of the Commission's President. Once more, President Barroso preferred to wait and first see what the member states would do. Once more, he missed an opportunity to put his Commission in the lead of EU affairs. But by letting the member states take the lead and by letting them spell out what the Commission must do, he reduces his institution to a role of implementation and execution.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have always considered that the EU is a union of member states and that she cannot proceed further than the member states allow her to. Well, under the present Treaty, the Commission is the guardian of the treaties and the sole body entitled to initiate legislation. Mister Barroso prefers to play to Sarkozy as Blair played to Bush, and we will likewise all live to regret it. In the meanwhile, commissioners Kroes, Kuneva and Vassiliou continue to work hard and effectively to protect the EU citizens and businesses from unfair competition, relaxed consumer protection, and negligence of public health.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the present crisis has raised the hopes of many a social democrat. Finally, finally, capitalism and liberalism are in crisis, they sigh with satisfaction. Time to dust old copies of Marx, Trotsky and even Lenin. It's been a while that Putin seems to have dusted Stalin, but that is another story, one for tomorrow's debate. It won't be long, especially if the crisis eases, that the social democrats of old will try to shame us all over again. We must under no account give in to that, but we would be well inspired to take a critical look at ourselves and to say definitely goodbye to all forms of ideological fundamentalism. Shall I name a few: market fundamentalism, private sector fundamentalism, deregulation fundamentalism, privatisation fundamentalism... None of these are ends in themselves. They are tools, means to ends. Liberalism is not about the economy, it is not about stock markets, not about easy money and not about lavish lifestyles.

Liberalism is about the freedom of the individual to pursue happiness without harming others. It is about recognising the uniqueness and dignity of each and every man and woman, of each and every member of mankind.

Je ne pense pas, Mesdames et messieurs, que nous nous soyons souvent rendus coupables de fondamentalisme idéologique, même pas en ce qui concerne l'Union Européenne. J'ai toujours considéré que la politique sert à résoudre des problèmes, à faciliter les choses et à les faire avancer. Je ne suis pas de ceux qui croient que la démocratie est faite de confrontations et de conflits. De débats, oui, bien sûr, et comment, mais les débats doivent déboucher sur un accord consistant et cohérent. Le consensus mou, cela ne vaut pas non plus la peine. C'est cette approche-là qui m'a guidée pour la préparation de notre manifeste. Enfin, manifeste, c'est un grand mot. Je préfère plate forme.

The preparation of our electoral manifesto started almost immediately after last year's congress. First we asked for your ten priorities, this enabled us to distinguish your four major areas of interest: civil liberties; single market; environment and climate change; and finally foreign and security policy.

For each of those we assembled previously adopted proposals and new ones you had sent us. Subsequently we held working group meetings devoted to those four areas of interest.

You have sent in a number of amendments, and I look forward for the outcome of the discussions but I am fairly confident that at the end of this congress we will have at our disposal a compact manifesto upon which our parties will be able to build their campaigns. You have also submitted a number of thematic and urgent resolutions which will be equally debated and hopefully adopted; We have expanded the time dedicated to those debates which should allow for in depth discussions. The flip side of these arrangements is early morning starts tomorrow and Friday but then, you cannot have it all.

Last year, I had high hopes for the European treaty. It was indeed adopted by the European council and ratifications proceeded swiftly until the Irish referendum. I consider, Ladies and gentlemen, that we share some responsibility for the negative outcome of the referendum. Indeed, while the proponents of a No flocked to Ireland in large numbers, campaigning with whole lies, half truths and mysterious monies, we listened to those who asked us to stay away and not to interfere. This was a huge mistake. We should have had the courage to explain why we had voted yes, just presenting our arguments and letting the Irish judge. Well, we didn't or we tried too late.

I hope that the few remaining member states that haven't yet ratified the Treaty, including our host country, will do so soon, and that it will be possible at the December summit to come up with a solution that is acceptable to the Irish people and to the 26 other member states. If we fail, the next European elections will have to be organised under the regime of the present Treaty, that is with a smaller number of MEP's than the Lisbon Treaty specifies, and then the next European Commission will, again according to the present Treaty count at least one member less than the number of Member States. This, by the way, was precisely one of the main arguments of the Irish No votes.

For these reasons, but also for those I mentioned in the beginning of my speech, we urgently need the new Treaty in order to better equip the Union to face the challenges of the future. In the meanwhile the liberal political family prepares for the next campaign and the upcoming elections. I wish you all a successful congress and thank you for your kind attention.

Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroeck  
ELDR President  
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