Flynn, Member of the Commission. – First of all I would like to thank Mr Chanterie for his report and for the support that he has given to the Community’s work on behalf of older people, not just during the preparation of this report but for many years. I wholeheartedly agree with you, Mrs McCarthy, that the third age is a hugely important asset for this Union and that older people want to contribute. That has been said in many of the contributions. They have something great to offer as the guardians of tradition and the guardians of identity. They have enormous wisdom and do not want to be left out of the action. They want to participate. If there was one thing that came from the Year of the Elderly, it was that elderly people – people of the third age – have contributed to all the programmes. That is the reason for it being such a great success.

The European Parliament has always been a great champion of the cause of European elderly citizens. That will not change. We in the Commission recognize that and are well aware that it was Parliament which, in the 1980s, first called for European-level action for older people and which put forward the idea of a European Year of the Elderly, which was a huge success.

Following the Year of the Elderly, Parliament, in its resolution of 24 February 1994, called for further wide-ranging actions to build on the achievements of that year. The proposal which is before you today in the latest stage in that process. It had the full support of Parliament and the Commission. The Council, Parliament and the Commission agreed that it was a successful year and this is the follow-up that was asked for at the end of that year.

It is well known that we, in the European Union, now have more older people in our society than we have had at any other time in our history. The numbers are growing. While the ageing of our society will bring many challenges it must be viewed as fundamentally a good thing. If we respond positively to it and if we deal imaginatively with the challenges that it poses then the ageing of our population can be a huge and great opportunity for Europe and for the further integration of Europe. When we count the votes in support of Europe we will find that an enormous percentage of the support has always come from older people who can well remember the structures of the past and know that this Union is built on peace and reconciliation and that the only way to guarantee it is to have an integrated society. And they want to be a part of it. All Europeans – the young, the not-so-young and the old – want to change the outdated ways of thinking so that we can all live longer and fuller lives.

There is a huge increase in the elderly. And we should recognize the difference that will make to society in general. The population of the Union will grow slightly from now until the end of the century and then it will drop quite dramatically so that by the year 2020, the population of the Union will in fact be about the same as it is today. There will be an increase of 18 million people of retirement age by the year 2020 and the number of elderly will increase by one third, from 52 million to 70 million. We can hardly contemplate the demand that will put on the resource transfer to cater for the needs of that older population.

The Commission, in its proposal, has tried to build on the practical and political achievements of recent years and put older people’s concerns very high on the European agenda. The year 1994 was an occasion for awareness-raising and for reflection too. We must now learn from each other’s best practice: how to ensure that older people are not marginalized and how best to meet their needs and fulfill their expectations in a changing world; for they have expectations and they expect us to respond to them. I suggest to you that this programme, limited as it is by the shortness of resources available to us, responds to what is asked by the elderly at the end of this successful year.

The Commission, when drawing up its proposal, has tried to take into account the wealth of guidance and advice that was given by all the key players in this field. We would recall that Parliament, the Council and the Economic and Social Affairs Committees all formally adopted preparatory texts. Everybody has contributed and been consulted on the formulation of this programme. The main NGOs were also extensively consulted on the drafting of the Commission’s White Paper on social policy and on this special proposal. So we have gone to considerable efforts to satisfy Parliament’s requirements and the requirements of elderly people themselves, in the document before you.

The proposal before you, with its clear emphasis on the Community’s supporting role, is the result of what you have said. It puts older people’s organizations and the practical experts who are close to this issue in a position where they can point out how older people’s needs can be better met through transferring best practice at European level. They really are the true experts. They give form to the decision and they will ensure that the actions we support are directly relevant to the lives of the older citizen.

Mr Chanterie, in his comments and in his report, clearly echoes our priorities. He would prefer to do more but he knows that we cannot at this stage with the resources available to us. We agree with him that older people themselves, through their very active organizations at national level and Community-level, should play a central role in the activities supported under this initiative. That is the key formula for the success of the programme: that they themselves play a major part in the design and the implementation of the programmes. I believe that will make them a success.

You have said many times, Mr Chanterie, that the next phase of action at Community level must be with and by older people rather than just for them. So, we – and by that I mean Mr Chanterie, all of the parliamentary Members, the Commission and myself – all share that one basic concern: to promote the wellbeing of the older citizens, those in third age. That is what we are committed to.

Mr Chanterie, if — only if and even if — any Member State rejects our proposal on legal grounds, our commitment and my commitment will not be diminished. We can all face that situation from a very positive point of view and I am putting it to you in that language.

I know that you do not expect me to tie my hands here tonight before the Council has had an opportunity of studying our proposals together with your opinion. To do that would be for me politically to give away my negotiating strategy. As politicians, please do not ask me to do that.

I am sure that you, Mr Chanterie, in my place would also wish to keep your powder dry rather than show your hand. But your commitment will stay, Mr Chanterie, and so will mine, as the Commissioner responsible. So, I am asking you, Mr Chanterie and your colleagues, to work with the Commission to push forward the interests of older people at European level. You will not be disappointed. That is my continuing commitment to this programme.

(Applause)