Joint meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament

PRESIDENT SCHIEDER. – Welcome to the joint meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. Arrangements for participation in this meeting are set out in the speakers list.

I remind members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that it was agreed between the leaders of the political groups that only members of the Assembly nominated by their group would be able to speak during this afternoon’s meeting. Unfortunately it will not therefore be possible for other members of the Assembly not on the speakers list to participate.

In the preparation for today’s joint session, we agreed on a general theme: “The development of Europe as an area of freedom, security and justice”. Those are fine words and they make a good title, but in these difficult and challenging times, when it comes to freedom, security and justice, words alone will not do. When the going gets tough, as our American friends would say, you must put your money where your mouth is. It is high time for Europe to do so, because the going has got as tough as it can get.

Our societies are facing the threat of terrorism. How are we going to respond to it? Are we going to accept that justice and human rights as we know them are incompatible with the prerogatives of security, or should we face the threat by defending, and also using, the values that the terrorists are seeking to destroy?

Europe’s prosperity attracts hundreds of thousands of desperate people, crossing borders and settling illegally in the hope of creating a better life for themselves and their families. How are we going to respond to that? By building walls to keep out the hopeless, and thus sacrificing freedom as we know it – both theirs and ours - on the altar of our affluence? Or by dealing with this challenge intelligently, by giving people hope of a better life where they are, and by better integrating those who are already amongst us?

Our environment is in danger. Recently Europe has felt the wrath of nature, for decades over-exploited, neglected and abused. How are we going to respond to that? Are we to respond by arrogantly denying the irrefutable reality and giving in to protect the short-term profits of the few, or by acting with resolve, responsibility and discipline, and by sacrificing some of our comfort today to give the chance for a decent life to future generations?

Our collective response to these questions is a test of how genuine our commitment to Europe really is, as being genuinely European is not a status gained automatically by one’s geographical location. It does not depend upon religious affiliation and cannot be decisively proven by historic links even if they date back to antiquity. Being genuinely European is a status that is not limited to members of this or that institution. There are many European countries that are not members of the European Union and there are some – even if they are increasingly few – that have European aspirations but are not yet members of the Council of Europe.
The genuine Europe is a set of ideals, values and beliefs. None of them is exclusive to our part of the world, but, taken together, they represent a unique and easily identifiable model of society. The genuine Europe believes in human rights. Our governments have given up a part of their sovereignty by allowing individuals to bring complaints against them to the European Court of Human Rights. For more than fifty years, this mechanism has been the backbone of our common effort to build Europe as an area of freedom, humanity and justice. It is the common responsibility of all of us who represent the Council of Europe and the European Union alike to protect, support and further develop this unique venture in the history of humankind.

The genuine Europe believes in global justice, whether for governments or individuals. Our experience of the European Court of Human Rights gives us every argument to hold that belief. That is why we support the International Criminal Court and why we should take a firm stand against any action that may jeopardise its purpose and operation. If Europe starts horse trading on what has been the hallmark of its human rights policy in recent years, it will seal the fate not only of the ICC, but of Europe’s aspiration to play a significant role in world affairs.

The genuine Europe does not execute people. Capital punishment is in absolute contradiction to our belief in justice and human decency. The genuine Europe believes in solidarity and co-operation among nations. There is no country in the world that is big enough or powerful enough to face today’s global challenges alone. Europe understood that a long time ago; others will certainly follow, hopefully soon.

Being genuinely European is not an automatically awarded title. It is something that must be earned through commitment and conduct. In times of crisis, Europe’s governments sometimes need to be reminded of that fact. Today’s joint session of Europe’s parliamentarians – together representing two of Europe’s foremost institutions and 800 million of its citizens – is an opportunity to give that reminder clearly and forcefully. Together, we shall not be ignored.