A/ Speech to European Economic and Social Committee,
Brussels 26 February 2003
Dear President, Roger
Dear Colleagues, Friends

I am delighted to have this opportunity to be with you today and outline the CoR's (Committee of Regions) priorities both in the context of the close cooperation between our two Committees and in terms of our roles as representative, consultative bodies, at this important time as Europe seeks to bring itself ever closer to our citizens.

I. Governance and Convention

We have come a long way since President Frierichs addressed the CoR plenary session in May last year. Europe is soon to become a Union of 25 member states and the Convention is now in a crucial phase in defining our future European Constitution.

The Commission's White Paper on governance, its consequences, the Lisbon process and the Open Method of Co-ordination have set out a new approach to governance in Europe, bringing Europe closer to the citizen. This represents a real springboard for both our Committees with opportunities to enhance our impact and visibility as interdependent, interconnected spheres of governance and representative institutions that are closest to the citizen, representing the diversity of civil society and the general interests of the towns and regions on the ground where civil society interacts with elected authorities.

When we are able to intervene at an early stage of the European policy shaping process, we are able to ensure that policy corresponds appropriately to the needs of citizens. On the basis of this, there is a strong argument for developing new forms of consultation based on the principle of "no legislation without consultation" and through our respective delegations of observers to the Convention we have been successfully arguing this case.

Article 34 of the initial draft treaty presented by President Giscard D'Estaing refers to participative democracy and is a positive sign that the final Constitutional Treaty will include specific proposals for early consultation with civil society and the local and regional authorities in which they interact.

Elsewhere, in our respective efforts to build new profiles for our Committees we have demonstrated the importance of establishing and strengthening constant dialogue with our institutional and political partners, demonstrating our capacity for sub national, territorial bodies and civil society to deliver added value into the policy shaping process.

This affirms our key role as deliverers and implementers of the principle of proximity as outlined in the Laeken declaration as a core value in the process of European integration. I believe this must be fully recognised in the future draft Constitution.

Strengthening and re-profiling our institutions, procedures and the European process must however go hand in hand with re-launching our policy goals and objectives around a shared project for Europe, as beyond a continent. Europe is also a community of values and experiences.

2) Enlargement and the Lisbon Strategy
As Europe enlarges to 25 member states and others prepare for admission, our Committees have a crucial role to play in safeguarding and steering its success. Within future Member States our experience and creativity is essential for the emergence and organisation of local and regional authorities and civil society actors if they are to be fully engaged in our future Europe. The priority for enlargement is cohesion - building a successful models for territorial, economic and social cohesion. In May this year the CoR will organise a major European conference of cities and regions in Leipzig on the future of European Cohesion policy and I am pleased that the EESC will be playing an active role in this important event leading a key workshop on employment.

The Lisbon strategy and the objective of making Europe the world's knowledge economy based on clear goals and benchmarks in education, research, employment and development respond clearly to the "Cohesion priority" and requires increased engagement and stronger participation by social partners, civil society and public and private actors in the definition of projects at the local and regional level.

In his speech to the CoR plenary earlier this month, President Prodi delivered a "wake-up" call to all European actors in the Lisbon process, reminding us of the considerable length that we have to go before we meet these objectives. President Prodi called for an acceleration of activity from the spheres of society we represent. I am aware of the considerable number of initiatives the EESC has taken in this regard and I would welcome joint efforts with the Committee of the Regions on horizontal themes which cut across the Lisbon strategy and in which we have a real opportunity to strengthen our individual impact and visibility in moving the Lisbon agenda forward through our capacity to multiply the Commission's initiatives on the ground and filter up best practice and experience from civil society and local and regional government, thus setting pace and momentum both in and beyond our respective areas of competence and expertise.