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Towards a Europe for all Ages

Summit of the Generations

Stuttgart, 2 May 1999

Address by Commissioner Flynn

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"Conflict or Consensual Cooperation between the Generations ?"

Ladies and Gentlemen,

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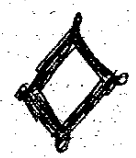
I am delighted to be here at this summit of generations and to speak to you on the theme "Conflict or Cooperation between Generations". This is a crucial issue at any time. It has always been a test of civilisation - how we care for the oldest, youngest and most vulnerable members of our communities. It is an issue which is made particularly urgent by the demographic changes facing us in the second and third decades of the 21st century.

We know that a large majority of older workers believe that they are discriminated against on grounds of age. That they are hampered on the labour market by age discrimination and ageism. And that they are afraid of losing their jobs because, no matter how good they are, their chances of finding new employment after the age of fifty are virtually nil.

Early retirement is not the answer, certainly not any more. Europe will increasingly need the productive output of its older workers. I have been working with my services to prepare a Directive under the new Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty which will seek to outlaw all forms of discrimination in the labour market on a range of grounds, including grounds of age. This is not only the right thing to do; it will be a timely and economically valuable contribution to better ageing in Europe. It will help us unlock the potential of our older workers.

But when I talk about the contribution of older people, I'm not just thinking of the formal workplace. In our draft communication we speak of "active ageing". That does not stop with retirement. Active ageing is about engaging in socially valuable activities such as voluntary work, informal service and making the most of physically and mentally stimulating leisure activities.

If we can create a climate of active ageing, we can achieve two things in favour of solidarity between the generations.



Firstly, the contribution of older people after retirement will be of real value to society

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as a whole. A large number of involved, healthy and experienced older people would have the potential to expand civil society and non-governmental organisations to an enormous extent. Everyone will benefit from such a development.

Secondly, by staying active, engaged and self-reliant, older people can contribute to restraining the inevitable increase in health and caring costs. In simple terms, staying active is good for health. We know from geriatric medicine that it can help postpone and minimise the effects of ageing. The additional cost burden can be minimised, again, to the benefit of all.

Nevertheless, we must recognise the inevitability that we will have to deal with significant and continuous growth in the demand for long-term care provision. So, as well as seeking to ensure the greatest possible independence of older people, our parallel priority must be to increase and improve care provision for those who need it when they need it. That, too, is crucial to the creation of a society for all ages.

Germany has pioneered the approach to this question with the development of its long-term care branch of the social insurance system, something which is of great interest throughout the rest of the Union. It is a good example of what I spoke about earlier - how present mechanisms for social solidarity can be adapted to handle the challenges posed by ageing. I have frequently urged other member states to develop their own ways of dealing with this vital challenge.

As I said earlier, when we look to the future in an ageing Europe, we in the Commission can see no miracle cures, no panaceas. Nor, however, do we see reasons to fear the inter-generational conflict which your theme suggests. I hope the Commission can help by sponsoring a productive exchange between policy makers and interest groups across the Union and it is in this spirit that I was very happy to take up the invitation from Madame Heinsch to take part in this conference here today. As I have said often before, in social policy, we in Europe share basic objectives but are very diverse in the way we meet these objectives. This is not a weakness; it's a strength. We have much to learn from one another. We can, together, find the right mix of policies and practices which will allow us to look forward to a future in which longer life can be celebrated as a great achievement for society as a whole and a great gift for people as individuals.

I wish you a successful and stimulating conference.

Thank you.