

Spun - long - l to ... 5/09
Lesse Brady

0111 100
TV VO
w APP

Towards a Europe for all Ages

Summit of the Generations
Stuttgart, 2 May 1999
Address by Commissioner Flynn

1165/A

"Conflict or Consensual Cooperation between the Generations ?"

01-1165 - A Sim 4

Ladies and Gentlemen,

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.

How we create a European Society which answers to the needs of the different generations - a "Europe for All Ages" - will be a significant challenge for European Social Policy in the next phase of its development. In the next century many more of us will live well into our 80's and 90's. How best to enable the generations to live and age together in an ageing society is the question addressed in the draft Commission Communication "Towards a society for all ages - prepared as part of the Commission's contribution to the UN International Year of Older Persons.

We are currently discussing the timing for adoption of this Communication. Our plans have been thrown out by the current caretaker status of the Commission; I hope, nevertheless, to be able to issue this Communication soon. What I can tell you is that it aims to raise awareness and stimulate the European debate about how to respond to the challenges posed by the ageing of our populations in the areas of employment, social protection, health and care.

The Communication takes a positive approach. It sees older people as a resource of great untapped potential while at the same time facing up squarely to the undoubted costs and difficulties which lie ahead. It sets out an objective which I am sure all of us here can accept - to ensure that the extra years of life which people can look forward to are spent with a good quality of life, in health and independence for as long as possible. The institutional and societal challenges that need to be met in order to do so are addressed.

The Communication is not seeking, or proposing, miracle cures or panaceas; but it does set out clearly that we need a coherent set of policies on ageing. It invites the Member States and European Citizens to see the benefits - to individuals as well

X

26

as society - of a strategy that will enable and motivate people to remain active as they grow older.

The prospect of the rapid ageing of our societies sometimes leads people to reach very bleak conclusions. This is wrong. We should not see demographic ageing as some sort of threat. Conflict between generations, the possibility suggested by your title, need not come about. We can reconcile the aspirations of older people for good, secure, long lives with the legitimate concerns of society about minimising the costs of longer lives. Europe will be able to cope - if we get our policies right. Think, for a moment, of how we have adapted our social structures during this 20th century.

The family used to be the sole framework for intergenerational solidarity. Families are still vitally important. But today the State and other public institutions supplement their work and are the main providers of income and healthcare for older people, just as they have a substantial role in the care and education of children. We earn social rights as individuals; we gain social benefits as a right; we also contribute as a duty to the common good at those times of our life when we can.

These principles have been developed in Europe during the second half of this century to a highly sophisticated level. They are, to my mind, one of Europe's greatest achievements. Simultaneously, we have created the possibility for people to live longer, healthier lives - this too is one of the century's great achievements.

Life expectancy has almost doubled. The 21st century is projected to add further years and maybe even decades to our lives. We are now told that a large number of the girls born today have a realistic chance of living till they are a hundred years old!

We are amazed - and also a little frightened and awed. But the key, surely, is to ensure that the principles of social solidarity which I outlined above should be adapted to the new situation and allowed to continue to operate effectively in the future.

Let me illustrate what I mean by reference to the issue of the retirement age. Our current pattern of solidarity sees people in the prime of life working and providing for the support of those in young and old age groups. Broadly two generations in work provide for the generation before and the generation after them.