

***11TH MEETING OF THE SENATES OF EUROPE***

*The Hague, 16-18 April 2009*

**ADDRESS BY THE VICE PRESIDENT OF THE ITALIAN SENATE**

**Senator Vannino Chiti**

*The Role of Senates in Europe*

1. Honourable colleagues, it is a great honour for me to take part in this 11th Meeting of the Association of the Senates of Europe. Parliamentary diplomacy and cooperation have gained increasing relevance over the last few years and they account for a crucial tool to tackle the international challenges we are faced with. Topical issues like the economic and employment crisis, international security and the fight against terrorism, the energy and climate challenge, call for effective and coordinated measures that our Government cannot fail to take.

2. The link between the national and supranational dimension is a defining aspect of today's world. National laws are increasingly linked to European and international legislation. Especially in Europe, our representative assemblies are called to perform a dual function: take part in the development of a European body of laws and ensure the transposition of

this *corpus* into the domestic legislation. National parliaments act as a bridge between the various institutional levels and their task is to support the implementation of the subsidiarity principle internationally ? by participating ever more actively and intensely in the work of the European Union and international organisations ? and domestically ? by relaying the requirements of local government. In bicameral systems, the latter task is performed by the Upper Houses which, in spite of their many differences in terms of responsibilities, tasks and division of power, share a general function as representatives of local communities.

3. The main challenge is the European construction. This is an irreversible historic process which however, every now and then regrettably grinds to a halt, as was the case with the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty and is the case with the Lisbon Treaty. Our meeting should send out a clear message: the Lisbon Treaty must be promptly passed and implemented in all countries.

The current financial crisis, which is rocking the whole world and will surely have an impact on economic and social life as we know it, requires more action at EU level. Single countries cannot overcome the crisis by going it alone.

To achieve this crucial goal, Upper Houses can give an original and unique contribution. The Europe of today is to be constructed not merely by

governments or their experts, but by involving the public from within our territories; not merely by transposing and implementing European legislation at home, but through constructive and creative means. Upper Houses of Parliaments do have a say, on the basis of what they represent, in the bottom-up process of formation of European legislation.

4. Italy is one of those rare cases where the two chambers of parliament have the same powers and functions. Our parallel bicameralism is a product of Italian history and has ensured the vitality of our democracy for a long time. Many feel, however, that this arrangement is no more relevant. A constitutional reform has been under consideration for some years, whereby asymmetric bicameralism ? similar to that of other major European countries ? should be introduced also in Italy. In searching for a new balance between stability and representativeness, the Italian Parliament feels the need to envisage different roles for the two chambers, whereby the Senate should act as a link with different institutional levels ? namely the EU, central government, regions, local government ? while the Chamber should keep its present strong link with the Government, as expressed in the confidence vote. The present trend towards a federal system of State may further enhance the role of the Senate, in that a federal country needs a unifying body to ensure national unity. I believe, however, and indeed hope, that also a new Italian Senate will be elected by universal direct suffrage,

also in view of the stark differences existing among the various regions, which call for a strong tool of political compensation of regional imbalances. In our context, a direct election would make the representative assembly more democratic and authoritative. In this way, it would thus be better placed to discharge its role as a political and institutional guarantor.

5. Enhancing the role of Senates in this direction would also be a way to combat the ever returning reductive notion of democracy, which might undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of representation and the principle of the separation of powers. As the great political philosopher Jürgen Habermas has explained, a transformation of the balance of constitutional powers is under way in parliamentary democracies which, contrary to what their constitutions establish, leads to an increasing prominence of governments over legislative assemblies. Bold decision-makers have a tendency to impose the government's agenda on parliaments. This may bolster the idea that parliaments are marginal bodies and feed a dangerous wave of contempt of parliamentarianism that Europe has already experienced in the past and that was at the root of grave democratic decline. My conviction is that democracy in the 21st century is faced with two challenges: populism within individual countries and ideological and religious fundamentalism, which feeds terrorism, at international level.

6. We surely should not shy away from the fact that Parliaments are in dire straits in many countries and that they should undergo a process of reform in order to regain pride of place in a democracy. The estrangement and sheer distance of individual citizens from their institutional representatives should lead politicians to some self-criticism. Holders of public offices cannot see themselves as members of a social class or category, because ? in a democratic society ? politics as a profession or as a calling should be at the service of the community and always under voters' scrutiny.

The oft-lamented rift between civil society and political decision-makers, which has generated the rejection of politics altogether by some, may be overcome also by opening up our assemblies to new forms of public information, openness and communication.

Information technology developments might help us make our procedures more modern and efficient, but ? most importantly ? they should be used to explain the intricacies of democracy at work to the general public. In this framework, the Italian Senate has implemented a number of very advanced projects which we hope can be exchanged and shared with other European parliaments and can support emerging democracies.

In an ever more united Europe and an ever more interdependent world, it is of paramount importance that we enhance the international activities of our assemblies, intensify exchange of experiences and documentation, publicise best practices and effective working methods. It is also in this way that a

parliament can be the hub of a modern democracy: by constantly renewing and maintaining its relationship with the public, by bridging the occasional gap between society and institutions, between society and politics.

This is, I believe, our primary task, our unique contribution to this stage in the construction of the European Union.