

*Inaugural address by the President-elect,*

*3 December 2008*

The PRESIDENT-ELECT – Thank you, Mr President and ladies and gentlemen for the trust that you have put in me. I should like to express my very special thanks to Jean-Pierre Masseret, our President, for all the hard work that he has done on behalf of the Assembly over the past three years. We have made great strides. He told me that he had thought that he would be the last President of the Assembly. Clearly, he is not the last President: we have a lot of life before us. I also thank my political group, the Federated Group of Christian Democrats and European Democrats, for the trust that it has put in me as its candidate for this post. As many of you will know, there is a bit of a stitch-up between the political groups with regard to who gets what turn to be the candidate, and I am very grateful to my colleagues in the group for the decision that they have taken.

In the past couple of years, we have seen a real watershed under Jean-Pierre Masseret's presidency, not least in crossing the Rubicon in May this year with the adoption of our new Charter and Rules of Procedure. I believe that we have now brought this Assembly into the 21st century, building on what Jean-Pierre's predecessors did over the 50 or so years preceding his term, from 1954 with the modified Brussels Treaty until he took over in 2006. I believe that the new status of the Assembly, bringing together the 27 national delegations, now gives us a real chance to go forward. It is especially important not only with regard to the 27 members, but with regard to the associate members, Norway and Turkey which are major contributors to European Union missions, and also Iceland.

There are major challenges ahead of us, however. We have to convince our own parliaments and their Presidents and Speakers, and the Chairmen of our defence, foreign affairs and European affairs committees, that what we have now created here is viable and useful. We also have to convince the European Parliament that we are a genuine European institution that will exercise parliamentary oversight in the areas of security and defence. We must now find ways to achieve a form of de jure cooperation and recognition with the institutions of the European Union, the Council and the European Parliament. Of course, various mechanisms are available, and I will not go into detail now, but there is much work and much negotiation to be done.

There is a vital role for this Assembly in showing parliamentary support for our military personnel who are in the field, whether they are in Chad on the EUFOR mission or elsewhere in Africa. There is the new mission off Somalia and the existing military mission in Bosnia, as well as the operations of our forces under different hats in other areas, including Afghanistan. We must further develop our relationship with the other interparliamentary bodies. We already have a relationship with the CIS Assembly, the Nordic Council, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. We also welcomed a speaker here yesterday from the Parliamentary Assembly for the Mediterranean.

In 1948, France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg signed what we all now know as the Brussels Treaty, the founding document of this organisation. We also recall what was in that Treaty and in the modified Brussels Treaty that was concluded here in Paris in 1954, because that is the legal basis for what we do in this organisation. Why do we as national parliamentarians come here to our meetings and plenary sessions? Virtually every one of us is elected to our national parliament to represent quite a small geographical area with a small number of people. The reason why we do it is not only that we have been elected by those small parliamentary constituencies to represent the people there as individuals; we are elected to our national parliaments in order to deal with the matters of state for which those parliaments have authority and competence.

One of these authorities which our parliaments operate either directly or through their government is the power to conduct foreign and security policy and to deploy of our armed forces. It is only under the authority of our national parliaments, whether directly exercised or, as in the case of my own country, through our national government, that our armed forces will ever be deployed. Any soldier, sailor, airman or airwoman who goes and puts their life on the line to defend the values of our societies that we hold so dear does so with the authority of our nation states. Such authority does not

exist in either the Council of Ministers or the European Parliament. That authority derives directly from the national parliaments that we all represent. When our ministers go and sit in Brussels to decide on joint action through the European Council, through the authority that they have deriving from the second pillar of the Maastricht Treaty under the provisions of common foreign and security policy, they do so with the authority of our national parliaments. If we are to exercise any form of oversight or scrutiny with regard to what those ministers do in our name, is it logical that we should have 27 individual defence or foreign affairs committees looking at the joint action of those bodies? Some of those actions involve not only the 27 members of the EU, but non-EU states that are none the less European nations. I am thinking in particular of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which was involved in Operation Althea, and of Norway and Turkey, which are involved in many ESDP operations.

What parliamentary forum is there that can exercise that kind of oversight? I believe that there is only one in existence today – this body, the European Security and Defence Assembly of the Western European Union. What will be necessary if we are to take this forward, and to remind all concerned that this is the work that we have done since 1955 in providing that kind of oversight, however those forces were involved, whether they were deployed under the authority of the Western European Union or of the European Union, or as in some cases, under bilateral agreements between individual member states, or within the context of NATO or the United Nations?

If we are to take this forward we should not be saying, “Poor us, poor Assembly, no one is interested in what we are doing.” We should be getting on with the job of doing what we believe we should be doing: exercising our role as elected parliamentarians, elected in our respective national parliaments, to get on and do our job, but at the same time sending a message to our national governments and heads of government and state that we are not asking that they go back and renegotiate any particular treaty. I do not know what will happen to the Lisbon Treaty. We should be asking our Irish colleagues that question. But whatever progress is made is to some extent irrelevant, because we have the existing legal base and all we need is for our governments and heads of government and state to acknowledge that and to acknowledge the vital role of this Assembly.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is much work to be done. No one will ask us to scrutinise their work. It is our right as elected parliamentarians to do our job. Our job here is to provide the essential oversight of common foreign and security policy. We will work with the Council, with our parliaments and with the European Parliament. Thank you for your support and trust. I hope to serve you well.