

**PRESIDENCY WORK PROGRAMME - DIALOGUE WITH EUROPEAN CITIZENS -  
OPEN DEBATE**

The open debate traditionally held when the work programme is presented at the beginning of each Presidency, and transmitted by television to the press and the public, was devoted by the Belgian Presidency to an exchange of views on how the Union could become closer to its citizens. To give structure to the debate, the Presidency had suggested some possible themes for discussion to

Ministers:

- how do the Member States regard the expectations and grievances which their citizens express about the European Union? How should one respond to them?
- how to respond better to the question of "why?", and how to explain major European issues
- what can the Union do to address the population at large rather than just insiders?

In his presentation, the President pointed out that although polls showed that economic prosperity, sustainable development, the affirmation of Europe's place in the world, and Europe as an area of freedom and security were still appreciated, a part of public opinion saw Europe as a distant, indeed hostile, institution, and its structures as anonymous and even aloof. The connection between the aims of the Union and its actions by means of its various policies was no longer clearly visible. The functioning of the institutions was becoming increasingly complex, calling their legitimacy into question.

Ministers held a wide-ranging debate on the various causes of the lack of understanding, indifference, or even hostility to European integration experienced by a part of public opinion. They considered how to reach the public as a whole, not just insiders.

At the end of the debate, the President drew a number of conclusions. Firstly, he noted that there was a broad measure of agreement on the problem: Europe was an enterprise distant from the concerns of its citizens, the aims and objectives of the Union were not sufficiently comprehensible, and all agreed that there was anxiety about the next round of enlargement.

In conclusion, the President established the following lines of action:

- prioritise content: improve perceptions of the Union by practical measures in areas close to the citizen: employment, the environment, health, justice, asylum, immigration and also foreign policy;
- improve perceptions of the Union: explain the significance of an enlarged European Union founded on the values of peace, stability and prosperity; convince Europeans and involve all its citizens in the debate on the future of an enlarged Europe – in this context a special educational and information effort is needed;
- the argument must be turned to the future: ensure that the debate on the Union has a transnational nature, and is not limited to the juxtaposition of national positions; avoid the use of historical references which are unknown or not familiar to younger generations;
- get the European message over more effectively: this open debate was a first step; rethink attitudes to the media and avoid Governments using Europe as a scapegoat; use everyday language which is familiar and comfortable for ordinary citizens, and avoid institutional jargon. The President took up the specific idea of launching a joint inter-institutional department responsible for communication with the public.

In conclusion, he thanked his colleagues for the excellent discussion and for the quality of their contributions, hoping that they had developed a taste for this debate which he proposed to continue, if possible, in the six months to come.