

Meeting of the Association of European Senates
Ljubljana, 28 June 2002

Bicameralism, Democracy and the Role of the Civic Society

Speech by the President of Spanish Senate, M.H. Esperanza Aguirre Gil de Biedma



Hon. President of the Senate of the National Council of the Republic of Slovenia,
Hon. Speakers and Presidents of the Senates of Europe,

Dear colleagues,

First and foremost I would like to thank President Hrovat for his invitation to participate in this "3rd Meeting of the Association of European Senates"

I would like first of all, Mr. President, to congratulate you for the convening and organising of this conference and also to pass on my thanks for the warm hospitality with which we have been received in this city.

Mr. President, before addressing myself to the topic of debate proposed for this "3rd Meeting of the Association of European Senates", I would like to express my acknowledgement of President Poncelet's personal endeavours in organising the Founding Meeting of the Association of European Senates, which laid down the bases for interparliamentary cooperation on a European-wide scale. Months later, in June 2001, he also hosted in Paris the First Meeting of the Association. Both conferences established the foundation for the association's ongoing viability. It would also like to congratulate President Poncelet for his initiative in creating our association's web page. This page will without doubt be conducive to even closer and stronger relations between us all in the future.

Another landmark in our association's brief history was the 2nd Meeting of the Association, held in Brussels and convened by President De Decker in November 2001. This proved that our association could serve as a forum for debating essential ideas for the future of our democracies. On that occasion this association also showed that it was capable of adopting resolutions on matters impinging in a decisive way on our freedom and the defence of our fundamental values.

I am referring specifically to the official condemnation of terrorism and the call to reinforce cooperation in justice and interior matters.

The European space, honourable Speakers, is not defined only in terms of organisations. The European space is fundamentally the framework for the defence of freedom and parliamentary democracy. From this point of view I believe that the relevance of the Association of European Senates will be directly proportional to its ability to voice the essential concerns of our citizens.

This point moves me to make a short consideration on the contribution of second chambers. Without getting too bogged down in historical details, I deem it fitting here to invoke the reflection of Hamilton, one of the founding fathers of American Federalism, who considered the Senate to be a crucial element in the balance and control of political and institutional life.

In our days the territorial grounds for the Upper House are easily understood and in fact are acquiring new force with the new territorial organisation of some states such as Spain. The International Conference of World Senates held in Paris in March 2000 clearly expounded the contributions made by second chambers to the democratic undertaking. Allow me briefly to invoke these contributions here:

Senates without doubt contribute towards publicising the political and legislative debate. The second reading of laws obviously gives society more time and greater chances to delve into the content of what is being debated.

Second chambers also reinforce the system of popular representation. This advantage of the Senate is particularly appreciable in countries like Spain, in which the election system is different for the Congress and for the Senate.

Reflection is the third element I would like to stress. The Congress undoubtedly has to function in an atmosphere of much higher political tension than the Senate. The Senate is not so prone to the temptation of flaunting political disagreements and is, on the other hand, more given to consensus and dialogue. Our Senate in fact quite rightly preens itself on being a parliamentary chamber in which the legitimate and necessary confrontation of ideas and political projects is based on dialogue and takes place in an atmosphere of cordiality, courtesy and respect for the adversary. In the Spanish case the majority electoral system, where the elector has to put a cross against the name of his/her candidate, prompts the parties to put forward fairly amenable characters as Senate candidates.

Senates, honourable Speakers, achieve their full representative meaning when they translate and express the concerns of civil society and guarantee the freedoms of their citizens. For that reason I deem the chosen theme of debate, "Bicameralism-Democracy and the Role of Civil Society" to be particularly apt, as it urges us to reflect on the representative system and the guaranteeing of civil liberties.

Our era has been witness to an uplifting resurgence of democracy throughout the world. Democracy is universally recognised as a fundamental tool in safeguarding citizens' freedoms and rights.

During the nineties, some there were who believed that democracy and freedom would be achieved effortlessly or that they would triumph by the sheer moral superiority of their principles and their greater wealth-producing capacity.

We now know that the culmination of the democratic processes in the West and the collapse of the communist system have not meant an elimination of threats and confrontations. The dramatic aggression against the Free World in New York and Washington show how difficult it still is for some to accept the basic rules of peaceful coexistence and respect for human rights. Now more than ever, therefore, democrats need to stand together and join forces to defend freedom.

As depositories of the national will and front-line defenders of our citizens' freedoms, we national parliamentarians need to put politics, in the noblest sense of the word, in the very forefront of our concerns.

Spain's vision is that national Senates need to contribute towards the strengthening of democracy in Europe while bringing citizens ever closer to the great debates that directly affect their hopes and freedoms.

Many thanks.