

Friends of EFA,

You have just elected me as Chairman of our party.

I thank you not for the title but for the task with which you are entrusting me. You are offering me the opportunity to commit myself at a European level to a body of ideas which have for the whole of my life been extremely dear to me and the N-VA, of which I am a member, and which can be summed up as being the right to self-determination of different peoples. I shall set about this work in the way once described by the late François Mitterrand: “*je ne suis pas l’homme d’un parti, je suis l’homme d’un combat à travers un parti*”.

During the weeks between the meeting of the Bureau on 13 January in Brussels and this General Meeting in Venice, I have gained an insight into the diversity which exists within EFA. The parties which one meets within EFA are very different in terms of size, programme, electoral support, political strategy ... At any rate, they each have their roots in specific historical, political, cultural and socioeconomic contexts in which their own nation, people, linguistic group, region ... is located. Healthy EFA diversity is growing and flourishing within the context of sound social commitment to the right to self-determination, respect for and validation of the various perceptions of identity as a basic requirement for genuine and involved European citizenship in a way which is far removed from violence and which is exclusively to be via a Parliamentary democratic route.

In EFA’s “Manifesto for the European Elections of 2009”, it was stated, and I quote: “*EFA is a pro-European party, but we are critical of the way in which Europe is currently being managed*”. And a bit further on in the text, it is stated: “*EFA is striving for a Europe of the Peoples*”. Obviously, these “peoples” cannot overlook the fact that European advancement, the expansion of the EU, is still exclusively proceeding via “statehood”. We may all really regret this, but, at this stage, reasonableness - neither more nor less - requires nations, peoples and regions, which from their own specific context see an opportunity for forming a state, not to hesitate for a single moment to pursue this route in a resolute manner.

EFA accommodates several parties which are fully committed, exclusively via the Parliamentary democratic route, to having their Basque, Welsh, Catalan, Scottish or Flemish nation placed on the European agenda as soon as possible.

As is compatible with the basic options of EFA, they strive for independence, not with a view to becoming insular or secluded, but in order to move away from this independence towards meaningful forms of co-operation, primarily with the other parts of the “old” state in which they had previously sat isolated as well as with their European partners. For this reason, EFA must be and remain the herald of internal expansion or “*internal enlargement*” of the EU.

Other members of EFA operate within a context in which it is not independence, but linguistic rights, cultural autonomy and respect and support for their particular perception of identity which are at the top of the agenda. Here, the concept of the “region” often arises, from which current states derive the markedly pejorative terms “regional” and “regionalistic.’ One of the essential tasks of EFA is to criticise and demolish this manipulative, oppressive and almost colonialistic condescension in an assertive way and to do so in all fora in the different states and in the EU. At any rate, it is pure historical nonsense to talk about national and regional languages within the context of an implicit or explicit scale of values on which some languages are rated very highly and others are suggested as being a wholly incidental phenomenon which can best go down as a part of folklore history as quickly as possible. All those with historical baggage will immediately respond that it is simply the case that some languages are politically successful and other languages are not politically successful. It is a matter of power relations and economic climates and not of intrinsic worth. The history of the relationship between the langue d’oil and the langue d’oc speaks volumes when it comes to these matters. The related concept of “minor languages” is equally inoperational, particularly if you bear in mind that 10% of EU citizens, that is to say 50 million people are directly involved with this, if the calculations of the “European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages” (EBLUL) are to be believed. In terms of pure numbers, it is also directly linked with many of the 23 officially recognised languages of the EU....

We within EFA must continue to attempt to remove big, irksome contradictions in the policy of many member states of the Union. Now take the widespread discourse on policy together with concrete action in the territory concerned with respect for and validation of diversity, a great part of which has particularly come into being in the twentieth century as a result of decolonisation and migration, when it is the case that the same policy-making establishments do not make any effort at all when it comes to the age-old forms of cultural diversity which exist within the lap of their own states, even where there is a danger that such forms of cultural diversity might not survive. And how is it possible to be properly concerned with “eco-diversity” if there is no similar concern in the area of culture?

EFA can also not close its eyes to the energy and financial resources which are being invested in the EU with a view to saving “heritage”. Many member states appear on the prestigious World Heritage List of Unesco as having cultural treasures. Why are threatened languages within the Union not being placed on this World Heritage List by the Union and its member states as a matter of priority, with the obligation of saving the languages from extinction and allowing them to flourish again? I will give you a recent example: the outgoing Dutch Minister Verburg flew to the Dutch Frisian island of Sylt on 17 March of this year in order to talk to Germany and Denmark about the Wadden Sea on behalf of the Netherlands. The talks were a success, since, after the Netherlands and Germany, Denmark is now also willing to apply for the Danish part of the Wadden Sea to be included on the World Heritage List of Unesco in recognition of this valuable area. Everyone was quite rightly satisfied, since it was what can properly be called a “nature monument”. However, I know of another monument in this area, a cultural monument which is part of the European cultural heritage, the Friesian language. I have still not heard from EFA partners “Die Friesen” and “Fryske Nasionale Partij” about a surge of proactive politics on the part of the three national governments which is intended to bring about the growth and burgeoning of the Friesian language.

As a Fleming who has just become the Chairman of EFA, I cannot end my view of the future without briefly mentioning a few fellow Flemings, of whom one is at the top of the European hierarchy and the other is at the “top of Europe” as a visionary. Herman Van Rompuy, the Chairman of the European Council, gave a speech at the College of Europe in Bruges, a training school for “Europeans”, last month, on 25 February. Internationally, his speech only attracted the attention of the Brussels correspondent for the “Financial Times”, with an echo being found in a small piece by J. L. Heldring, the former Chief Editor and now still a columnist for the quality Dutch newspaper “NRC”. The FT correspondent talked about a “very important” speech and, as evidence of this, he cited the following passage in the “Financial Times”: *“The more the EU has to do with foreign affairs, the more certain it is that particular differences will emerge between the member states. History and geography play an important role in foreign policy. Such differences are real and will not simply go away”*.

These are wise words from the President of the European Council. He must now learn that, even within the member states, “history and geography play an important role” in “domestic matters” and the differences which result from this are “real” and will not simply go away.” What some of the member states have in their modern history and up to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries allowed themselves to do with regard to the imperialistic displacement of boundaries and annexations, cultural oppression and expulsions “will not simply go away”, as Van Rompuy so nicely puts it. If he manages to show some consistency, he will,

as President of the Council, become an ally of those who strive for “internal enlargement” of the EU, and he will encourage the member states to tackle the cultural and other consequences of brutal behaviour, particularly as a result of the so-called “peace agreements” after the two world cataclysms of the twentieth century. I will confine myself to one particular example: the President will have to agree with “*Süd Tirol ist nicht Italien*”.

For that other Flemish fellow citizen who considers himself to be at the “top” of Europe, the Chairman of the Liberal group in the European Parliament, Mr Guy Verhofstadt, any thought of identity is outmoded, fundamentally wrong and, indeed, a vector for potential mass murder. He has written: “The gas chambers of Auschwitz are the ultimate consequence of thoughts about identity”. Neither more nor less! The Chairman of my party in Flanders, Bart De Wever, has asked whether they know at the “Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya” that the Chairman of their group in the European Parliament regards them as members whose political strivings will ultimately lead to the gas chambers. – In the meantime, I shall myself talk with “Convergència”, where I have some friends. We within EFA, Mr Verhofstadt, do not posit identity as a finality, but approach it as a function which is full of constructive power for Europe. We within EFA place the emphasis on citizenship based on civil and cultural elements which will lead towards an inclusive view and perception of nation and people. We within EFA are opposed to thoughts such as those of Verhofstadt which would like to eliminate the rich range of diverse perceptions of identity in Europe and which would not wish to allow these perceptions any freedom or to grant them any right to exist in order to impoverish their Europe by reducing it to a single uniform, post-national ... market.

I want to take my leave of you with these fundamental concepts of “freedom” and “law”, but not before I have taken a slight detour via the poet August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben (1789-1874) – you know, the poet who, among other things, wrote the so-called *Deutschlandlied* (“Song of Germany”). As a result of much horror in the course of the twentieth century, whole sections of the text are still read wrongly. When he wrote it in Heligoland in 1841, he gave it the name *Lied der Deutschen* (“Song of the Germans”) in brackets: Hitler did not like that song at all! The third stanza begins with “Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit” (“Unity and law and freedom...”). Thus, it does not read “*Einheit*” (“unity”), but “*Einigkeit*” (“unitedness”). Only after the decline of law and freedom in the unsuccessful German Revolution of 1848/49 was the word “*Einigkeit*”, which stands for the “diverse in unity”, changed into “*Einheit*”, which stands for the “singularity of a stipulated unanimity”. Moving away from Hoffmann von Fallersleben to the present day, I conclude as the Chairman of EFA that it is only from a perspective of law and freedom for the nations and

peoples of Europe that a diversely unified Europe can come into being. It is on that Europe that we wish to build. Only that Europe can be our fatherland.

Eric Defoort

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Venice