

Annemie Neyts

Your Majesty,
Dear Prime Minister,
Dear Colleagues,
Dear Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

Thank you. It is a great pleasure to welcome so many of you here this afternoon for the launch of our campaign for the 2009 election of the European Parliament. That you have come in such large numbers from all over the European Union testifies of your faith in the European Union, in democracy and in liberalism. It also is proof of the persuasive powers of the secretariat of ELDR which, under the guidance of secretary general Federica Sabatti, has worked relentlessly for a successful campaign launch. I know, it is still early day, but as I won't be speaking later in the evening, I would like to invite you to give them all a warm applause.

I would also like to thank our two host parties, the Belgian MR and Open VLD for their generous help and support.

I am most grateful to all the participants in today's launch: Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen from Finland, who will address us; former president of the European Parliament Pat Cox, president of the European Movement International; Meglena Kuneva, the Commissioner for Consumer Affairs; Didier Reynders and Bart Somers, the leaders of MR and Open VLD; Guy Verhofstadt, former Prime Minister of Belgium and leading candidate of Open VLD and Louis Michel, Commissioner for Development and leading candidate for MR. I also welcome Graham Watson, the leader of the ALDE Group in the European Parliament and candidate for the presidency of the Parliament, who will address us later. And I appreciate very much the presence of LYMEC president Aloys Rigaut. He personifies our youth, and therefore, our future.

I equally am grateful to all my colleagues from the ALDE group and to the candidates who will participate in the four debates which will take place.

I am also most thankful that Simeon Saxe Coburgh Gotski, former Prime Minister of Bulgaria is amongst us, and I most appreciate that Ayman Nour, opposition leader in Egypt, and Michail Kassyanov, former Prime Minister of Russia and opposition leader are present this evening.

But ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, I am most thankful for your presence. Without you, this event would be meaningless. It is your presence which gives it strength and meaning. I sense enthusiasm amongst you and this bodes well for the campaign.

Of course, all campaigns are important, but this one will be a very special, a crucial campaign. The first direct election of the European Parliament took place exactly thirty years ago, in 1979. This campaign is the very first one in which we face parties that are opposed both to liberalism and to the European Union.

We find them at each end of the political spectrum, on the extreme left and on the extreme right. Interestingly they are united in their selection of their main enemies, be it for opposite reasons.

The European Union stands accused of fatally undermining the identity of the European peoples and nations; liberalism stands accused of undermining the fairness and equity of our societies, and of hollowing out the interpersonal solidarity. The European Union also stands accused of being too liberal.

Needless to say, these parties have found in the present crisis lots of fuel for their false arguments, because false they are.

Let's take a closer look at the identity argument, to begin with. If the Union really undermined national identities, then how come that a Brit, not to mention a Scot, or a Welsh person after so many years of European Union (and so many centuries of United Kingdom); is still a Brit, or a Scot or a Welsh person, and why then are Danes still Danes, and Swedes still Swedes; and Catalans still Catalans.

The truth is that the sixty years of European Union have increased the understanding amongst the peoples and amongst the nations, but have hardly touched the cultural and linguistic identities of the half billion of citizens living on its territories and that is how it should be.

The truth also is that the enemies of the Union are fearful of too many contacts with aliens and foreigners as if their identities could crumble and disappear if so contaminated. When they say they want another Europe, another Union, they are actually saying they want to get out, to leave the Union altogether. And then I ask, why aren't they, for the most part, saying so? That would clarify the debate. I'll tell you why they aren't saying clearly that they want to leave the Union. They don't because they know full well that, in spite of misgivings, the great majority of their voters wouldn't follow. One might not love "Brussels" and all what it is supposed to stand for, but one knows instinctively that it is cold out there, if you are on your own, especially in these times of crisis.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is one great paradox. The crisis which we are going through, demonstrates the necessity and usefulness of the Union. Where indeed, would we be, if we were, each of us, on our own, and had to face the crisis alone? A Union of half a billion of citizens who still are the richest in the world, is clearly so much better equipped to overcome the crisis, then each of our nations would be if we had to muddle through alone.

The crisis helps us to make the case for the European Union. Does it also help us to make the case for liberalism? That is a slightly tougher one, but let me try.

On the one hand, you have what they say about us. On the other hand, you have what we, liberals in flesh and blood, real liberals, not textbook liberals, do day by day. Facts are stronger than lord Mayors, as we all know, and therefore we are fully entitled and justified to refer to what we have been doing, to refer to our acts.

Let me turn to the liberal commissioners, for a start. Let me point to Siim Kallas, Olli Rehn, Neeli Kroes, Marian Fischer Boel, Meglena Kuneva, Androula Vassiliou, Louis Michel, Janesc Potocnik and Leo Orban. Each of them has struck the right balance between efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, principles and pragmatism.

They didn't needlessly rock the boat, they didn't put up silly ideological fights, but each of them has improved the office and polity he or she was put in charge of. Just a few examples: the profound reform of agricultural and fisheries policy without so much as a strike or a riot; the reform of the administration of the commission; the prevention of protectionism in the wake of the crisis;

the, successful conclusion of delicate and difficult negotiations with candidate member states; the securing of patients rights; the new generation of economic partnerships with developing countries in the wake of initially fierce opposition; much improved consumers' rights and protection; the fifth freedom, the free movement of knowledge and research.

All of these are acts, acts performed by liberal commissioners, acts to be proud of.

I can also point to the track record of our colleagues in the European Parliament, to the track record of the ALDE Group. We have contributed to all of the major achievements

during this legislature. These actions, ladies and gentlemen, should speak more loudly than all we are accused of. We are no starry eyed naïve believers in the virtues of invisible hands and auto regulation.

We have helped to bring about major pieces of regulation and legislation, but it is true that we have always kept in mind the necessary balance between regulation and innovation; legislation and entrepreneurship.

The socialists today publish a pamphlet in which they accuse us of wanting to deregulate railways, and postal services, and health care.

It seems they want to return to the good old days when citizens were hostage of the public services, had to put up with delays, late deliveries, and waiting lists including for life saving surgery. It seems they want to return to the good old days when public services were first and foremost providers of employment rather than services to the general public. Well, we don't. We believe that effective and efficient services are essential for service oriented economies like ours.

Our acts speak for us, and are the most effective answer to the accusations made against us.

As my speech draws to a close, I would like to say a final word about the excellent cooperation I enjoyed with the liberal prime ministers. Graham Watson and the former Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt took the initiative of inviting them to a luncheon just before European summits. Over the years a real bond has been established to which I have been happy to contribute. Anders Fogh Rasmussen was always present, he who also has participated in and contributed to all major ELDR events of the last four years. As we know, he has been chosen to be the next Secretary General of NATO. We all are extremely proud because he is one of us, and because he deserves it. But we will miss him. May I invite you to applaud him and to join me in congratulating the new prime minister of Denmark, who, you'll never believe it, is also a Rasmussen. A different one, but I trust we will work beautifully together.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I must conclude.

You know what Gladstone said about liberals. That they trust in people, but that this trust is qualified by prudence. And you know what he said about conservatives. That they distrust people, because they fear them. We will need trust in this campaign, and prudence, but we will above all need enthusiasm, and commitment, and hard work; lots of hard work.

When I look at you, I prudently trust that we will be able to do just that. Commit ourselves, and work hard, very hard, in order to win.

I wish you all every success come next June.

Annemie Neyts MEP
ELDR President
Minister of State
Brussels, 16.04.09