



European Security and Defence Assembly
Assembly of Western European Union

**Address by the President of the Assembly, Robert WALTER MP,
at the European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments
on “Rights and responsibilities of the Opposition in a parliament”**

Limassol, 10-12 June 2010

[Welcome and introduction; recent elections in the UK]

Mr President, honourable speakers and presidents of parliaments, esteemed colleagues,

Talking about the role of the opposition in a parliament is something I can do from my own personal experience. Until only a few weeks ago, I was an opposition parliamentarian myself. The irony of destiny even led to my having someone stand against me in my constituency – as my strongest competitor – whose party now, after the general election, forms a coalition government with my own party.

So after weeks of at times fierce battles for citizens’ votes, we both now need to explain our government’s policies to the constituents. At the same time, I continue to listen to their concerns and bring them to the attention of the government.

A parliamentarian who represents the government in power should never cease to be, first and foremost, the representative of his or her constituents.

[Particular difficulties as regards parliamentary scrutiny of security and defence policy]

The field of foreign, security and defence policy, in which my Assembly specialises, is a particularly difficult one for parliamentarians in general and for opposition members in particular.

In these policy areas governments have a near total monopoly of information and go practically unchallenged as far as their activities are concerned. Governments control the embassies, intelligence services and, of course, the military. Security and defence policy are special or “reserved” areas where the usual standards for transparency and scrutiny may be more honoured in the breach than the observance. This is true also of the European security and defence policy, where governments have deliberately excluded the European

Parliament from taking on a greater role. Our governments meet and discuss highly sensitive issues among themselves, and often merely present parliaments with the results – which we then have to take or leave!

Nevertheless, even in the field of security and defence policy the parliamentarians of the majority, who may have access to a good deal of information through informal channels, tend to have more than a little advantage over their opposition counterparts. As President of the Assembly, I have come across parliaments where the opposition is systematically prevented from acquiring any substantial knowledge of the national defence budget! In other countries, governments maintain special funds, scrutiny of which is open to only a very few members.

In order for there to be equal access to information, most parliaments have developed tools that are available to all members or to all parliamentary groups. One of the most effective ways of involving opposition members is to have a system whereby the offices of chair of important committees are allocated to opposition parliamentarians who can then set the agenda and influence parliamentary proceedings.

[Role of interparliamentary assemblies for opposition parliamentarians]

But to come back to European security and defence policy, a policy field characterised by its intergovernmental nature, the existence of interparliamentary forums for exchanges of views, like my Assembly or the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, offers both majority and opposition parliamentarians some further opportunities for obtaining information or for or cross-examining government representatives. The experience of our Assembly has shown that opposition members especially tend to be interested in being appointed rapporteur for a particular topic. And it is obvious why: by participating in international interparliamentary work, parliamentarians from the opposition, as well as the majority, can compensate for the lack of transparency and paucity of information at the national level. Only well-informed opposition parliamentarians can be expected to act responsibly.

Today is an important opportunity to remind ourselves of the useful part interparliamentary forums can play in providing parliamentarians with the breadth of information and knowledge they need for the effective discharge of their constitutional mandate to scrutinise the actions of their governments.

[Call on speakers of EU countries to establish a follow-up mechanism to the Assembly]

May I take this opportunity to call on the speakers of the parliaments of the 27 EU member states to step up their efforts to equip their parliamentarians with an interparliamentary instrument designed to help them scrutinise European security and defence policy. The Lisbon Treaty offers the framework for such an interparliamentary mechanism and invites

national parliaments to become more involved with the EU. Our Assembly's activities will end within the next 12 months. This allows time for a follow-up mechanism to be established. It is important that the size of delegations to any new structure should not fall below a certain limit so as to ensure opposition parties get a fair crack of the whip.

Delegations should continue to reflect the full spectrum of political views in each member state parliament. Otherwise, there is a risk that the interparliamentary structure will do no more than reflect the political perspectives of the member governments. Also, because Europe is wider than the EU, a mechanism for interparliamentary scrutiny should involve parliamentarians from European NATO states that are not yet members of the European Union as well as those from other interested European countries. Europe needs to deepen the cooperative approach to security. Because parliaments encompass both majority and opposition views, they can play a crucial role in paving the way for deeper mutual understanding and the development of common views on how to deal with the security challenges we face.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention.