

# European year of equal opportunity for all

## Trevor Phillips, Lisbon, 19 November 2007

Thank you and good morning. I feel in a difficult position here after hearing such an eloquent presentation and before lunch! I would like to congratulate the Portuguese Presidency on its leadership including on political representation and integration.

Could there be a better place for the activities of the EU Year of Equal Opportunities for All to conclude than here, in Lisbon?

It was here in 2000 that European leaders set the goal for the European Union to become the most dynamic and competitive economy in the world by 2010.

But they knew that we could never realise these economic ambitions in a Europe without equal opportunities for all; they knew that we could never meet our social objectives in a Europe where the poverty of our parents condemns us to ignorance, ill-health and more poverty. And they knew that we would never meet our political goals in a Europe divided against itself, whether by class, race, or any other identity characteristic.

That is why this gathering is so important.

Ten months ago, in our opening ceremony in Berlin, I argued that there were two main questions facing Europe and indeed humankind today:

1. How can we live with our planet?
2. How can we live with each other?

It may seem a large claim to make, but in my view, it is now the second of these questions that faces Europe with the greater challenge and our failure to answer it which presents the greater threat.

If we, the countries across the Union, fail to capitalise on the energy and the contribution of all our citizens, we will more divided and unstable in the short term; less competitive and more impoverished over the medium to long-term.

For Europe to achieve economic growth, every European must be empowered and energised to contribute to it.

For Europe to achieve true legitimacy amongst its citizens, every European must be able to participate in its culture and its democracy.

And for Europe to win the confidence of its communities every European must be accorded their full measure of social justice.

In short, for a new Europe to realise its potential it must be built on foundations of fairness, of dignity and of respect. We must aim to become a people confident in all aspects of our diversity.

But day by day the challenges grow larger.

We live in times of rapid change.

Economically, our nations are making the transition from industrial, manufacturing economies to knowledge-based, service economies in less than a generation. Some of the newer members of the Union are making an even faster transition from closed economies to open, free-market economies.

Alongside this, social and demographic change is sweeping across Europe. We have populations with greater numbers of older people than ever before. Of the world's 20 oldest countries, 19 are in Europe. And we will continue to age over the next 25 years. Nearly a quarter of people in the European Union in 2030 will be over 65.

Across the 25 countries of the European Union, one in six people of working age is either disabled or has a long-standing health problem. More and more of us will define ourselves as disabled over the coming years. And by the way, the fastest growth is in children under the age of 16.

Family structures are changing. In Britain, and I am sure this is a trend being mirrored across Europe, almost a quarter of households are now headed by a lone parent. There are more stepfamilies.

And whatever the structure, all types of families are now shrinking in size. The average birth rate across Europe is now only 1.45 children per family - well below the natural growth needed to keep the populations at current levels. The fact that Europeans are living longer and having fewer children could reduce the European population by 48 million between now and 2050.

This hyperdiversity isn't just a reflection of what we are; there is also a groundswell of change in who we think we are, or at least in who we would like to be. People who a generation ago would have hidden their identities are ready to be recognised on their own terms – and we have just heard a moment ago a triumph and affirmation of that identity.

Women do not accept that they should have to behave in a way typical of men in order to succeed at work.

With the introduction of civil partnerships in Britain, and civil marriages for gay and lesbian people in Belgium, Spain and the Netherlands, lesbian and gay people no longer feel the need to hide in the shadows.

Muslims do not accept that they have to be responsible for the criminal actions of a minority of sick individuals. Jews refuse to be forced underground by the resurgence of anti-Semitism. These changes are liberating for women and for minorities; but they are vital for the whole population of Europe.

For one thing the default category that Europe is comfortable with - white, male, middle-aged, Christian, non-disabled, and under-50 will soon become a minority in the workforce. So the answer for us is to provide a foundation that provides opportunity for all; a real capability to participate in the job market and the economy, and also in society and in politics.

But the most unsettling and obvious changes are of course being driven by immigration.

Migration is a major global phenomenon. International labour markets, greater opportunities for travel, mass communication and modern technology all contribute to a world in which nearly 200 million people live and work outside the country of their origin. That is a similar number to the total population of Brazil.

Europe - which used to be a continent of emigration - now hosts around 35% of all international migrants, driven here by the availability of jobs, the freedoms assured by liberal democracies and facilitated by cheap travel back and forth to the sending countries. In an era of Ryanair and Easyjet you could say we now have a new kind of European citizen, the Ryanarbeiter and Easy migrant.

As an indication of the scale of migration, in 2006, migrants worldwide sent home an estimated \$269 billion in remittances - more than twice the official aid received by developing countries. And these figures only represent official, recorded amounts of money. Some studies suggest that if unofficial channels were also included, the figure would be fifty per cent higher.

In today's post-imperial, post Cold War world, we face migration that comes from all corners of the globe, in all colours and speaks many languages. There is an ever greater variety of sending countries, which contributes to our growing ethnic and religious diversity.

The average length of stay is falling rapidly, particularly for migrants who travel within the EU for employment reasons. A hundred years ago the fact that Jews couldn't go back, for example, to Central Russia, meant that they had to assimilate integrate. For many migrants today, the possibility of returning home at some point is a very real one. Many do so. So the change is unprecedented in its rate, pace and pervasiveness; and it makes the need for a stronger focus on integration more than ever before.

All of these demographic changes bring massive social opportunities. They boost our economies and enrich our societies. But they also carry other consequences - new identities, new ideas and new frictions.

And they bring social costs which we must acknowledge.

Let me give you some examples:

- Over 18 million are unemployed in the European Union. A disproportionate number are over 50, disabled or from an ethnic minority. How can we ensure that they are not disadvantaged by having to compete with skilled migrants?
- Rapid population growth as result of immigration, family breakdown and other kinds of social change will stretch public services and infrastructure; but typically the people who most suffer from pressure on schools, health services and transport are the poorest in society – including previous waves of migrants.

We need to take a robust approach to ensure that the social costs of change are evenly distributed and do not lead to increased inequality.

Bill Clinton once said that globalisation is a fact not a policy.

Globalisation can only work for the European people if there is fair and just distribution of the rewards of globalisation. To achieve this, we need to overcome entrenched patterns of disadvantage and old ways of working; we need to combine openness and ambition with cohesion and social justice.

One part of our approach must emphasise skills. The UK government, for example, has just announced for example that it wants to create 7.5 million training places in order to ensure that there are capable British workers able to compete for British jobs. This surely should be a European ambition if we are to meet our Lisbon targets.

The other part of our approach should stress social justice – and on this front our ambitions should be just as large. Because surely this is where our equal opportunities drive should make a difference. So what has happened this year?

Well, first some good news. The European Commission's commitment in its legislative work programme for 2008 to bring forward another Article 13 Directive - one which completes Europe's patchwork of anti-discrimination legislation - means that this time next year Europe could be well on its way to becoming a more significant driver of equality in all its member states.

We are in the process of anticipating this in the UK. We have a new Equality Act in the making. It will harmonise our disparate anti-discrimination legislation, and dismantle the hierarchy of rights which exist at present. But we at the Commission want the law to be more than a tidying up exercise. We want it to be truly radical in its aims and ambitious in its scope.

And that, perhaps, is where the good news continues. This year in Britain we launched the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, and I am privileged to be its Chair. We are Europe's first integrated equalities and human rights Commission with powers to enforce the law as well as promote it.

The Fundamental Rights Agency also launched this year. This will be the first time that age, sexual orientation and religion are addressed by an EU agency. I hope that it will work with member state equality organisations to expose new issues of discrimination facing areas that have until now not enjoyed same protection as the established areas.

From our experience so far the FRA will face a range of challenges so far unseen by equality and antidiscrimination bodies and not yet dealt with by our legislative framework.

In just one week, we at the Commission – our Helpline, our staff and our Commissioners – can be asked to offer our views, clarify the law, or give guidance on subjects as various as:

- How to tackle gang culture amongst young people
- How better to ensure dignity and respect for people in care, both young and old
- What constitutes discrimination against women, pregnant or otherwise
- Whether an employer can refuse to employ a hairdresser who wears the veil
- What books might or might not be provided in schools or places of worship
- Whether a town in England should be allowed to display 'No Popery' (no Catholics) banners on Bonfire Night
- Whether a public authority should prioritise English translations or more English classes
- What should be the human rights afforded to prisoners either foreign or domestic
- What are the implications of the law on abortion for the way in which we discharge our duties to disabled people under statute
- And looking forward, if insurance companies should be allowed to read your DNA and see whether you have a predisposition to some disabling condition and, if so, whether they should be permitted to load your premiums for the risk that you might one day develop the condition that you don't currently have – or would this be yet a new dimension of inequality that should be outlawed?

In this new world we confront novel questions every day. And if we are to become the society we all want – one built on fairness, dignity and respect, confident in all aspects of its diversity, we have work to do. Above all, we must not allow difference to become an excuse for inequality.

So what more do we need to do to meet the challenges of tomorrow?

I want finally to set out four steps.

First, we need to complete the legislative framework for equality across all grounds.

Four years after the deadline for the transposition of the Race and Employment Directives, we do not know that all European governments have fully lived up to their promise to do so. At the moment the information is confidential about whether member states are failing to deliver. Once it is made public, if there are member states which are lagging behind, they should be named and shamed. A crucial element of a competitive European space is a guarantee of a level legislative playing field; protections should be the same wherever we go.

The European Commission's work to harmonise legislation can provide a focal point to lead and drive this change.

Second we need to ensure that we can make the law stick. And that means that we need to know when people are saying the words without changing the reality.

Even when legislation is in place, it needs to be enforced. We need systemic change, and concrete action to locate equality deficits. Which means monitoring. Relentless, rigorous monitoring.

Which groups are under-represented in workforces? Which groups consistently fail in education? Which groups end up in poverty upon retirement? Which groups suffer worse health? And what about mental health? Are there higher suicide rates for certain groups? Which groups are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system?

We can never know the answers to these questions without monitoring. We will never achieve equal opportunities for all if we cannot even quantify who is falling behind. That means monitoring on the basis of ethnicity, gender, age, disability, religion and even sexual orientation – supported, according to Eurobarometer, by 75 per cent of Europeans.

It is therefore a matter of deep disappointment to me, and should be for the whole of Europe, that the Constitutional Council of France has rejected the proposal for ethnic monitoring made by President Sarkozy. It surely must be a step backward that one of the great nations of Europe seems so unable to take even this most simple, basic step. If égalité is to be a réalité, then France must accept modernité.

The fact that you refuse to identify and quantify discrimination and disadvantage does not mean that it will no longer exist. In 2008 it will be time to open our eyes to the truth.

But we do not collect statistics just for the hell of it. We need to know what is wrong so we can put it right. So third, we need some new tools to remedy what we find. Once equality gaps are identified, what action should we take? Here again, I favour active intervention.

Though things are changing they are changing too slowly. Institutional inertia means that even with all the goodwill in the world, it is taking just too long to eliminate the practices that we all know hold back women, for example, or exclude older people.

We need positive action, by which I mean special measures to compensate for the disadvantage that certain groups suffer. National governments need to encourage greater and more ambitious use of positive action, and also facilitate that use with a clear statement of guidance on how positive action can lawfully be used.

Finally we need to increase the level of energy and resource our governments put into the challenge of diversity.

Next year is the Year of Intercultural Dialogue. In our changing times, this is imperative to improve understanding, increase toleration and build bridges across divides of human difference. Our aim should be to persuade the leaders of the EU 25

to put as much effort into managing the changing relations between people as they put into tackling the changing climate.

In the short-term it will not be the planet's wrath that sends us back 200 years – it will be our own inability to give each other the respect and dignity to which we are each entitled.

This is a closing conference. But to paraphrase one of Europe's great leaders in an earlier age: This is not the end of our battle. It is not even the beginning of the end. It may be at least the end of the beginning. Today is just another step in our journey. Next year, as I believe they say here in Portugal 'a luta continua'

Thank you