

Briterne vil i EUs førertrøje

Magtgreb: Med et detaljeret udspil til fremtidens EU forsøger den britiske regering at forme debatten i EUs nye forfatningsgivende konvent. Samtidig bejler Tony Blair kraftigt til regeringscheferne i Italien og Spanien.

AF OLE BANG NIELSEN

BRUXELLES

Det er EU-landenes regeringer og ikke EU-Kommissionen i Bruxelles, som skal drive det europæiske samarbejde fremad. Men det gør det nødvendigt at skabe et langt mere effektivt samarbejde mellem EU-landene. Og det hidtidige system med, at alle medlemslande – også de små – har en repræsentant i Kommissionen og på skift leder formandskabet, må derfor skrottes.

Sådan hedder det i et kontroversielt forslag til en reform af EU-samarbejdet, som den britiske udenrigsminister Jack Straw i går fremlagde i en tale i den hollandske regeringsby Haag. Det britiske udspil kommer kun en uge før, EUs såkaldte forfatningsgivende konvent bestående af 102

medlemmer for første gang træder sammen i Bruxelles for at drøfte, hvordan et EU med op til 30 medlemslande skal kunne fungere.

»Hvad vi er interesserede i, er en forenkling af den måde, EU arbejder på. Så kan man kalde det en forfatning eller ej«, sagde Straw i talen. Han lagde vægt på, at EU først og fremmest må have mere effektive beslutningssystemer.

»EU eksisterer for sine borgere, ikke for en politisk elite ... I må have bedre beslutningskraft, bedre demokrati og bedre leveringskraft. Det Europa vores borgere ønsker er et, som trives økonomisk med flere job og hjælper med til at garantere vores sikkerhed«, sagde han og slog fast, at Storbritannien under konventets arbejde i det kommende års tid og på den efterfølgende regeringskonference i 2004 med ændringer af EU-trakta-

ten mere ønsker praktiske forbedringer af EU end langhåret diskussion om at udvikle føderale modeller for Unionen.

Tysk-fransk akse

Det britiske udspil ses i Bruxelles som et svar på ideer fremlagt sidste år fra tysk side om, at EU skal udvikle sig mod en egentlig europæisk forbundsstat. Ideer som har fået varm opbakning fra mindre lande som Holland, Belgien, Østrig og Finland og en mere lunken støtte fra Frankrig.

Straws udspil indebærer først og fremmest, at EU-Kommissionens magt skal rulles tilbage, mens medlemslandenes regeringer og parlamenter skal have mere hånd i hanke med det daglige EU-arbejde. Det skal ske ved, at der oprettes et »super-ministerråd« i Bruxelles – muligvis ledet af en person udpeget for to et halvt år ad gangen inden for kredsen af EUs stats- og regeringschefer. Samtidig skal der udpeges en fast leder over flere år af arbejdet i de vigtigste ministerråd som f.eks udenrigsministrene, finansministre-

ne og justitsministrene.

Jack Straw afviste enhver spekulation om, at de store lande skal sætte sig på EUs beslutninger ved at skabe et internt »sikkerhedsråd« som man kender det i FN med faste pladser til de store lande. Men de små lande kan stadig frygte for, at de store lande med den britiske model kan »dele« top-posterne i EUs nye »superminsterråd« mellem sig. Desuden står de små i den britiske model til at miste indflydelse gennem tab af fast plads i Kommissionen og en afskaffelse af de roterende formandskaber.

Storbritannien plejer ikke at melde så kraftigt ud i debatterne om EU-samarbejdets udvikling, men Labour-regeringen under Tony Blairs ledelse er i de seneste år begyndt at spille mere konstruktivt med på den europæiske boldplads. Briterne har bl.a. sat sig i spidsen for udviklingen af EUs nye militære muskler.

Bejler til Berlusconi

Samtidig forsøger London at udnytte, at de to hidtil dominerende regeringer i Paris og Ber-

lin i år er mere optaget af valgkamp end af at lede Europa.

Franske og tyske aviser har skrevet bekymrede artikler om stigende knasen i den fransk-tyske akse, og Blair har søgt at udnytte den fransk-tyske lammelse til at skabe politiske kontakter til de to andre store lande i EU: Italien og Spanien. Silvio Berlusconi og José Maria Aznar er som borgerlige politikere lydhøre over for Blairs linje om at gøre Europas økonomi mere liberal og »amerikansk«, og der spekuleres nu i en »London-Rom-Madrid akse« i EU.

Den britiske Europa-minister Peter Hain var fræk nok til forleden i den franske avis Le Figaro at fastslå, at »ideen om et Europa styret af Tyskland og Frankrig er død«. Her spæde han samtidig, at Labour-regeringen allerede næste år søger euro-medlemskab. Det bliver også nødvendigt, hvis briterne skal nå nogle vegne med sine nye europæiske ambitioner, lyder det tørt fra fastlands-europæerne.

le@berlingske.dk

What Britain thinks about the future shape of the EU

- **An elected president of the European Commission presiding over a federal Europe?** No way! The prime minister wants the EU to be run by its member states.
- **An EU constitution?** Begrudgingly, yes. Britain is not enthusiastic about the idea of a constitution because it conjures up images of a European superstate.
- **Incorporation of the EU charter of rights into EU law?** No chance. Business is concerned it would give new rights for workers to embark on industrial action.
- **A shift in power from the Commission to the council of ministers?** Definitely. Britain would love to downsize the Commission and upgrade the council.

- **New institutional structures to make the EU council of ministers more effective?** Yes please. Jack Straw, foreign secretary, yesterday set out proposals to improve the council.
- **Further reductions in Britain's national veto in EU policy-making?** Keep it quiet, but the answer is yes. Mr Blair is willing to consider more qualified majority voting in the EU council of ministers, notably on asylum and immigration policy.

Concessions on national veto temper vision for reform of European Union

By Andrew Parker,
Political Correspondent

Britain yesterday set out to win widespread support for its proposals to overhaul the European Union with a carefully balanced reform package.

Jack Straw, the UK foreign secretary, called for sweeping improvements to the way the EU council of ministers works, to entrench its supremacy.

But the proposals were tempered by the government's willingness to accept further erosion of the national veto in European policy-making.

Mr Straw also signalled that Britain could accept

Franco-German plans for an EU constitution, although it would resist a legally binding document.

The opposition Conservative party immediately attacked Mr Straw's keynote speech at The Hague, saying it could not accept an EU constitution or a reduction in the national veto.

But the Foreign Office is confident that Mr Straw's blueprint for an EU driven by its member states will be more popular in European capitals than Germany's federal vision.

The Foreign Office believes it will also be more popular with Europe's citizens, who have grown increasingly disillusioned

with the European Union.

European leaders must finalise a new treaty in 2004, to ensure the EU's decision-making structures are not paralysed by enlargement from 15 to 25 member states.

Next week, a European convention will begin work on options for reform, and Mr Straw's speech in the Netherlands was intended to set out the UK's agenda.

He argued that the EU could tackle a "gulf of understanding" with its peoples through a statement that outlines "what the EU is for". Mr Straw accepted it could be called a constitution, although Britain would resist a legally binding document.

He said the EU could achieve greater democratic accountability through an enhanced council of ministers, which implied a downgraded role for the European Commission.

Under Britain's reform plan, the EU's rotating presidency would be scrapped and replaced by a "team presidency".

The various councils of ministers that cover subjects from agriculture to transport would elect their own chairmen and women for two-and-a-half years.

Mr Straw said: "The chairmen of these individual councils could work together as a steering group, in effect a sort of team presidency."

The foreign secretary's speech offered a number of concessions on further EU integration. As well as the willingness to accept an EU constitution, Mr Straw said Britain would consider increases in qualified majority voting in the council of ministers.

He suggested Britain might accept an end to the use of the national veto in asylum and immigration policy.

Mr Straw also signalled a retreat from the prime minister's proposal last year for a second chamber of the European parliament to act as a check on the EU.

Britain sets out vision for a better Europe

By Andrew Parker,
Political Correspondent

Britain will today set out its vision of a European Union dominated by ministers from EU member states rather than officials in the Brussels-based commission.

Jack Straw, foreign secretary, will use a keynote speech to set out proposals to entrench the supremacy of the EU council of ministers.

He wants the EU's next treaty, to be finalised in 2004, to reverse the public's disillusionment with Europe, and believes his proposals have a realistic chance of being implemented.

In a speech at The Hague, Mr Straw will insist that ministers from the member states must set the EU's agenda.

"Although democratic legitimacy should reside in many different parts of the EU's structures, democratic accountability does lie first and foremost with the council [of ministers]," Mr Straw will say.

"People expect their heads of government and ministers to look after their interests, and will hold them to account in their national parliaments, national media and national elections."

Mr Straw's speech addresses the problems posed by the EU's enlargement from 15 to 25 member states and possibly more.

His most controversial proposal is for an extension of qualified majority voting in the council of ministers, which would lead to more European integration. Britain is willing to consider

qualified majority voting on asylum and immigration policy, partly because ministers believe it could lead to a reduction in the number of asylum seekers that reach the UK.

Mr Straw is also expected to argue that heads of government should take decisions by qualified majority voting in certain instances where their ministers have been unable to reach agreement.

But the foreign secretary will reject the opposition Conservative party's assertion that more European integration diminishes nation states.

"Pooling our sovereignty helps us strengthen our significance as nations," Mr Straw will say.

Britain wants the 2004 treaty to provide for sweeping reform of the way member states control the EU's agenda.

Currently, a member state holds the EU's rotating presidency for six months. Spain, the current holder, chairs the council of ministers that take decisions on subjects that range from agriculture to transport.

But the enlargement of the EU makes the rotating presidency increasingly unwieldy, and Mr Straw will set out changes. He will argue ministers on the subject councils could choose their own chairmen and women.

Mr Straw will argue the chairmen could form an EU steering group to drive through an annual agenda set by heads of government, known as the European council.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY
EMBARGOED UNTIL 1040Z, 21 FEBRUARY

**SPEECH BY THE RT HON JACK STRAW MP, FOREIGN AND
COMMONWEALTH SECRETARY, THE HAGUE, 21 FEBRUARY**

"REFORMING EUROPE: NEW ERA, NEW QUESTIONS",

Mr Chairman,

It is a great honour for me to stand here in a building at the very heart of Dutch democracy.

Your political traditions have influenced the development of the European Union from its outset. But your influence on political thought in the UK goes back much further.

In the 16th century, an Englishman, Sir Thomas More, visited the Netherlands on a diplomatic mission. Inspired by his surroundings, and under the influence of a dialogue with his great friend Erasmus, he developed his concept of an ideal society in his book *Utopia*.

150 years later, it was again to the Netherlands that British Parliamentarians turned in their struggle against the absolutist politics of King James II. The arrival of William and Mary, and of the "Glorious Revolution", guaranteed the rights of the British Parliament and founded our constitutional monarchy as we know it.

Mr Chairman,

My aim today is not to provide a blueprint for the future of Europe, but rather to ask some fundamental questions:

First, how can we make the EU better understood?
Second, how can we make it more democratically accountable?
And third, how can we make the EU more effective?

The Convention on the Future of Europe, which begins its work in a week's time, is an opportunity for the whole of the EU, and the applicants who wish to join it, to debate these questions. It will then be for the governments of the member states to take some difficult but key decisions.

I welcome this debate. We in Britain approach it with confidence. And there could be no better time for it.

We stand on the edge of a genuinely historic moment – the unification of Europe not by force of arms, but by force of argument.

This round of enlargement will mean that most of the great cities and the great cultures of Europe will soon be within the EU; and those that are not in this round want to be in the next.

Enlargement is a great opportunity for Europe. It will promote jobs, wealth and security in both new and existing member states. Over a year ago, the Netherlands and the UK proposed the timetable for bringing in the new member states. The European Council adopted it. Now we must make it a reality.

But we have also to remember that enlargement is a great challenge. In its own terms, it is an ambitious undertaking for existing as well as new member states. It involves three times as many applicants as any previous enlargement. And with it will come much greater economic disparity. Whilst the admission of ten new applicants for 2004 would add 23% to the EU's land area, and 20% to its population, it would add just 4% to its GDP¹.

Enlargement – and its prospect – also raise some serious questions about the way the EU runs at 15, let alone at 25 or 30.

Reform is critical if the EU is to function properly. But it has to be said that the nitty-gritty of issues like co-decision versus council supremacy, QMV, or CAP leaves many, if not most, of our citizens pretty cold.

So before deciding on the “what”, we need, first, to spell out the “why” of the EU, the “why” of the case for change.

Last week I visited Afghanistan. My first reaction at the utter devastation of parts of Kabul, and, worse, at the elderly faces of children acquainted too early with grief, was to think that this was another world: that “it couldn't happen here”.

Then I remembered my early childhood - just after the war - the bomb sites all over London, pictures of the ruins of Rotterdam and Coventry, Cologne and Dresden, and the aftermath of the Holocaust. Then in that so-called post-war “peace”, there was the Berlin blockade, the Iron Curtain, and more recently there has been the carnage in the Balkans.

And I reminded myself that for centuries Europe had been defined by conflict as bloody, as senseless, as that experienced anywhere else in the world; that Europe's latent capacity for violence in pursuit of what we want - or think we want - is terrifying.

¹ The 4% figure is based on measurements of candidates' GDP in 2000 expressed at current prices and euro exchange rates. Expressed in terms of purchasing power standards (PPS), the GDP of the candidates is 9% of the EU-15 GDP (source: EUROSTAT)

Indeed, the great Dutch patriot and humanist, Grotius, made the same point over 400 years ago when he wrote in his *Prolegomena*, "I saw in the whole Christian world a licence of fighting at which even barbarous nations might blush. Wars were begun on trifling pretexts or none at all, and carried on without any reference of law, Divine or human".

"No more war" is what the European Union has helped achieve in the last 55 years. It has done this of course in association, crucially, with the Atlantic alliance, NATO. But the contribution of the EU itself has been heroic.

I compare my teenage years with those of the present generation 40 years on.

Then, for many who had lived through the war, the still visceral suspicions of the Germans, the Austrians, the Italians; the fact of fascist dictatorships in Spain, Portugal and Greece, and the Communist dictatorships across Central and Eastern Europe; the passport, customs and exchange controls.

Today: democracy; free movement for millions across Europe; a common currency in 12 countries; a Single Market soon to embrace half a billion consumers; common action to combat threats to our environment and our security.

And, more than just the absence of war, the EU has established powerful values for good: it is these values which have provided a sense of direction for the former Communist states when the experience of their neighbours in the Balkans shows the route they could have taken.

The EU has also helped create a nascent sense of common identity among its citizens and nations: the idea that people can be Europeans as well as citizens of their own nation state, and that nations operate more effectively as partners, not rivals.

Mr Chairman,

Our citizens expect their national governments to ensure their security and prosperity.

But in many respects, this can no longer be done through measures which apply only within our national boundaries, if ever it could.

On one issue after another – crime, asylum, the environment and many others – we have to work across national boundaries: but these days we do this most effectively not just by co-operating, but by pooling sovereignty.

Indeed today, to an increasing degree, pooling sovereignty helps us strengthen our significance as nations. It is at the supranational level that we can achieve our goals in a way which is no longer possible at the national level.

As a sovereign state, our strength is enhanced by the strength of our alliances: our security and prosperity depend on our ability to influence events in the rest of our continent and the rest of the world, not on our ability to stop others from influencing us.

Working with our partners in the EU strengthens British democracy, and Dutch democracy, and French, Danish and Portuguese democracy, and in future Polish, Czech and Slovenian democracy, because it enables national governments to do what they are elected to do. It shows our peoples that their political choices can make a difference.

So there is no sense in which the identity of nations has been diminished in the EU. Indeed, nations have become more confident and therefore more relaxed about themselves. Because of this, there has been a greater readiness to celebrate diversity within nation states by conceding greater regional autonomy – as for example we have seen in Spain and the UK, both of which are nation states of long standing.

The eminent military historian, Sir Michael Howard, in his essay *The Invention of Peace*, asserted that “the [nation] state not only makes war possible: it also makes peace possible”.

This is because the nation state is an idea which has delivered strong institutions and is comprehended by its citizens in an instinctive way. It can therefore deliver and sustain a peace with other nations.

So for all the turbulence there has been in history between the states of Europe, there is a fundamental acceptance of their existence, and of the way they operate.

The position is, however, different for the EU. The Laeken Declaration rightly highlighted the “disconnect” between Europe’s institutions and its citizens.

Across Europe, the turnout in elections to the European Parliament has fallen below 50%.

Referenda in Denmark and in Ireland have reflected a disenchantment with the EU.

The reasons generally for this disenchantment are many and complex, but I would like to offer one possible line of analysis.

If I can compare Europe to a motor car, then I would say that it is becoming more reliable at getting us to where we want to go. But it does still seem to spend an awful lot of time in the garage.

Because we have not yet got the mechanics of the EU right, we still use up too much time and energy on the processes and not enough on the outcomes; whilst our citizens want the reverse. For they care less about institutional debates than about things like jobs, the economy, safe food, crime, a clean environment.

The EU exists for its citizens, not for the political élites. So even as the Convention starts to discuss Europe's institutional shape, let's not forget that the sort of Europe our people want is a thriving one which generates jobs and helps to guarantee our security. Reform of the processes of decision-making in the EU has to be directed at improving the EU's ability to deliver these outcomes.

But at the same time, unless people understand the processes and institutions of the EU, the Union will always be dogged by these problems.

This gulf of understanding goes right to the heart of the difficulty with the EU's legitimacy.

These problems are, in turn, compounded by the fact that no clear language has yet developed to describe the EU and its institutions, except by analogy – often a false one – with the nation state.

Lacking the vocabulary to describe the EU as it already exists, it is not surprising if people feel uneasy when they are told the EU is changing.

Yet there should be nothing inherently threatening about reform.

Every day, politicians and elected leaders have to make choices between progress and stability. People want both: and a proper balance between them.

“Progress” has been the guiding star of political debate in the West at least since the Enlightenment.

But people have to feel safe about change.

In the EU, there was little institutional change for the first 30 years. In the last fifteen years, by contrast, there has been almost permanent revolution. We have seen the Single European Act, and the Treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice. Soon we shall embark on yet another IGC. This sense of constant upheaval unsettles many people.

But the pace of change in some member states at the same time has been scarcely less rapid. In Britain, for example, the first four years of the Blair Government saw more constitutional reform within the UK than we had seen at any time since the 19th century.

Yet within our nation state, people understood and consented to these reforms. For we do so, as you do so, on the basis that Parliament decides.

When people understand the process of change, and have faith in the institutions, it is much easier to strike a balance between stability and progress. In the EU, because the process is impenetrable and distant, it is often little understood and lacks legitimacy.

Our objective should be an EU which is better understood, better liked and with which our citizens are familiar and comfortable: an EU whose institutions have the structural stability they need to concentrate on the radical reform and renewal which a rapidly changing world demands.

So the Convention and IGC over the next two years are vitally important. We have to seize the opportunity they give us to get the structures and processes of the EU right.

And so I come to the three questions which I asked at the beginning of this speech.

I want to explore each of them in turn, and offer some thoughts on how we might find answers.

The first question is **how can we make the EU better understood?**

We have to establish a better comprehension of what should be done at European level, and what should be left to the member states at national, regional or local level. The current lack of clarity here creates the impression that power is draining away from national governments to the centre, in Brussels. We have better to explain why collective decision-making is sometimes more efficient; but not take this assumption for granted.

And we have to do more to explain to our citizens the practical benefits they derive from EU membership. But perhaps at the same time we have to provide a more coherent statement of what the EU is there for. The Treaties, lengthy and complex as they are, do not do so.

This need not mean drawing up a long list of every activity of government, setting out in detail who should do what, and at which level.

That would take years to negotiate, and anyway there are many areas where the EU and its member states will want to act together.

But there is a case for a simpler statement of principles, which sets out in plain language what the EU is for and how it can add value, and establishes clear lines between what the EU does and where the member states' responsibilities should lie.

Put like that, few people could object. But call it a constitution, and suddenly for some it doesn't look like such a good idea.

My own view is that we shouldn't get hung up about the labels. Yes, most countries are founded on single-text, written constitutions. But just because an entity has a constitution doesn't make it a state. Many organisations, including the Labour Party, have constitutions. It's the substance that matters, not the name.

One principle which should stay at the heart of the EU is subsidiarity – the idea that action should be taken by the Community only if it can do a better job than the member states.

Although this idea has been around for a decade, we have not yet hit upon an effective way of enforcing it.

One way could be to set more detailed requirements as to how subsidiarity is applied, and to strengthen the ability of the European Court of Justice to overturn EU legislation which fails the test.

Another could be to give national Parliamentarians a role as the guardians of subsidiarity. This could also be a task for European Scrutiny Committees from Parliaments across the EU, meeting collectively. Or, as we have already proposed, a new second chamber of national Parliamentarians could perform this role.

Once we have clarified what the EU should be doing, we should turn to my second question: **how can we make the EU more democratically accountable?**

Some argue that the President of the Commission should be elected by the European Parliament.

I don't buy that. This would undermine the Commission's independence, and make it the prisoner of the largest political grouping of the day. Members of the Commission are themselves wary of this step.

Instead, we should maintain the institutional balance and strengthen the EU by making all of its institutions more effective.

We have to begin with the Council of Ministers. Although democratic legitimacy should reside in many different parts of the EU's structures, democratic accountability does lie first and foremost with the Council.

People expect their Head of Government and Ministers to look after their interests, and will hold them to account in their national Parliaments, national media and national elections.

But can a Council of 25 or more governments do more than just talk? Can it take decisions? If so, how?

I believe it can, but reform is needed if it is to do its job better.

We have to look again at the rotating Presidency. This was originally devised for a community of six: one Presidency every three years. At 25, it will be once every 12½ years, or eight times a century.

The Presidency system has enormous attractions. It gives every member state – large or small – an equal stake in running the Union. But it was very striking that Louis Michel, the Belgian Foreign Minister, concluded after his country's Presidency that the system no longer really works in a Union of 15, let alone of 27 or more.

This has everything to do with the size of the Union, not the size of the country holding the Presidency. If a much larger EU is to be effective and cohesive, then we need a much longer planning period than the six months of a Presidency, to avoid the artificial peaks of activity which a Presidency induces and to have a better way both of establishing and delivering strategic objectives.

This is not to say that we should abandon meetings in the member states. I myself have gained valuable insights into the thinking and outlook of my colleagues from visiting them for informal Councils. So I hope that, even as we reform, we can preserve the traditions of occasional informal meetings away from Brussels.

One way of getting away from changing the Chairman of the Board every six months, while continuing to give each of us a stake in the running of the EU, would be to have a different national chairman in each of the specialist Councils.

At the same time, we could cut the number of Councils from the current 16 to, say, 10.

It would be essential to have a rotation to ensure equality between large and small member states, but, if each Council had its own chair, and if that chair were to serve for, say, 2½ years, then you would get greater continuity of expertise and a more grown-up habit of consultation between Council, Commission and European Parliament than at present.

The Chairmen of these individual Councils could work together as a steering group, in effect a sort of Team Presidency, to ensure that the strategic direction given by the European Council was followed through.

Whether the European Council chose to operate on a similar basis or to maintain the existing six-monthly rotation is a matter for discussion.

We also have to think about how the General Affairs Council should operate. Though I would say it, wouldn't I, I think it works extremely well in directing the Union's common foreign and security policy.

What it increasingly cannot do is give strategic direction to the specialist Councils, whose work is just that – detailed and specialist. But the GAC still has to be able to manage the big negotiations.

Whatever solution we adopt, we have to remember that Europe works best when the European Council and the Commission work together to establish a strategic agenda, which is then passed to individual Councils to implement. This is what has happened with two of the EU's most important projects: the Tampere agenda on Justice and Home Affairs, and the Lisbon process of economic reform.

So I believe there would be important benefits in regular – perhaps annual – strategic discussions in the European Council, working from Commission proposals. These would give democratically elected Heads of Government the role of providing “impetus”, and setting “political guidelines”, for which the Treaty provides at Article 4.

If greater clarity and accountability are essential to a better EU, so too is improved efficiency. My third question which I posed at the outset is **how can we make the EU more effective?**

Reform of the Council, along the lines I have suggested, will help. Giving elected governments a clearer and more pronounced role will also improve the EU's legitimacy. And if we can do that, we should then consider extending the scope of Qualified Majority Voting.

This need not be a radical step. Already, the great majority of Council decisions are taken under the QMV system. There are of course significant areas where QMV will never be the right method.

But there are still areas where the need to secure unanimous approval for decisions is standing in the way of much-needed reform.

Decisions on the sites of EU agencies are one area. No one needs a repeat of the unedifying and unproductive stalemate we saw on this at Laeken. It would be absurd to require 25 or more countries to reach consensus on issues like these.

And, as both I and my successor as Home Secretary, David Blunkett, have argued, asylum and immigration policy could be conducted more efficiently for all if QMV were the rule. Such a move would patently be in Britain's national interest.

More importantly, I believe we could now look at extending QMV upwards as well as across.

Does it make sense for decisions to be taken by QMV at individual councils, but then overruled in the European Council? We have already seen the dilution of important reforms to the CAP in this way. And many feel that the use of the European Council as a court of final appeal clogs the agenda with unnecessary detail when Heads of Government should be looking at the strategic picture.

But reform cannot be limited to the Council.

As I said earlier, I want to see all the institutions strengthened. Reform of the Council, and a more effective application of subsidiarity, should help the Commission do its work.

At Nice we agreed to cap the size of the Commission, and, when we get to 27 member states, to have fewer Commissioners than the number of member states.

We will have to come back to this issue in due course.

When we do, the last thing we will want is a Commission whose members see themselves as national representatives.

The Commission should be of a size whereby it can be efficient and effective, which can manage the enormous range of business for which it is responsible and also operate collectively as the body which initiates and implements proposals and safeguards the Treaties.

However we reform the Commission, we have to have a system which is equitable between member states, whatever their size.

For our part, we are ready to contemplate not always having a Commissioner – whether in a system of rotation, in which all member states are treated equally, or some other way.

There would also be positive benefits to the EU in a more effective Parliament. The EP already plays a valuable role in holding the Commission to account.

Under Romano Prodi, Commissioners have begun to appear before the EP when requested. Maybe this could be formalised in a Treaty article. And if we moved to a system of annual agenda-setting by the European Council, the EP President should play a full role in the preparation.

We can also raise the Parliament's profile by building closer links with our national Parliaments, an area where the Netherlands sets the standard.

But the EP has to take a more active and constructive role for itself too. I would like to see it taking a greater interest in monitoring the way laws are carried out, and especially taking a more rigorous look at their financial implications.

The EP should also systematically look at ways it could cut down on unnecessary EU activity and law. If a piece of legislation is no longer needed, European Parliamentarians should be the first to call for its repeal – and have a process to deliver this.

Mr Chairman,

I have asked some fundamental questions about the future of the EU, and I have offered some ideas on how to approach those questions. I look forward to the Convention, and to working with Jozias van Aartsen and our other colleagues on finding the answers.

Whatever solutions we decide upon, we have to bear in mind one overriding goal: the need to carry our citizens with us.

As we push ahead with reform, we have to convince and reassure our citizens that we are not changing the EU institutions for their own sake, or in order to arrive at a pre-ordained structure, but rather to find new ways of serving the citizen better.

This time, we have to get it right: to achieve the right balance between progress and stability, and to win people's confidence that the system serves their interests.

The EU has to become as responsive to its citizens' priorities as the national governments of the member states.

One of our most pressing tasks, as governments and as Parliamentarians, is to convince our electorates that this process matters: that they have a part to play in it, and that they can influence the outcome.

Our aim should be to build a Europe which is better understood, more democratically accountable and works better. Our focus in the Convention should therefore be better decision-making, better democracy and better delivery.