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The New European Maritime Policy

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Maritime Policy Conference

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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to open this conference on an all embracing maritime policy for Europe. I would like to thank the organisers for the invitation and compliment them on being among the first to hold a public discussion on this subject.

Maritime policy has always been a subject close to my heart – and not just because I am Portuguese!

As Foreign Minister of Portugal I campaigned for Lisbon as the site for EXPO 98, which was devoted to the theme of the oceans and the future. At that time Portugal hosted several important international conferences on oceans and seas affairs and was instrumental in establishing the UN's 1998 International Year of the Oceans. These experiences convinced me of the importance of both oceans governance and the role of oceans for the future of mankind.

The rest of the world, too, is growing increasingly aware of this importance. For example, the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg recognised that oceans, seas, islands and coastal areas were critical for global food security and for sustaining economic prosperity, and called for better ocean governance.

But what does 'better ocean governance' mean in practice? For me, it means joining the dots when formulating our policies. It means taking an integrated approach that recognises the immense economic, political and environmental value of the ocean and coastal areas of our continent.

For far too long our policies on maritime transport, on coastal regions, on offshore energy, on fisheries, and on the marine environment have been developed in separate compartments. Of course, we tried to ensure that their impact on other policy goals were taken into account. But no one was looking at the links between them. No-one was examining in a systematic manner how these policies could be combined to reinforce each other. No-one was analysing the implications of the fact that - at the end of the day - they all relate to the same basic resource: the world's one ocean - particularly that part of it which constitutes the coastal waters of our continent.

We need to care for our oceans and seas as key assets for Europe's future welfare. We need healthy oceans and seas, we need to conserve biodiversity, we need sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, safety of navigation, and appropriate protection of our coasts. We need this as the indispensable foundation for the development of new and sustainable economic opportunities.

This means more cooperation, coordination, and consistency of sea-related policies. Recognizing this, I launched in 2002 a Maritime Strategy Commission in Portugal, which became one of the first countries to take this integrated. And when I became President of the European Commission, I immediately took the initiative of creating a new portfolio for Maritime Affairs. We often speak of the importance of innovation in the private sector, but I believe that innovation in government has become equally important if we are to deliver on our goals. Maritime policy is a perfect example of where this is starting to happen.

We all know Europeans have had a close relationship with the sea throughout history. From the earliest periods the oceans and seas have served to connect Europeans with each other and with the outside world. You could say they were the first vehicle of globalisation, carrying goods, technologies, and values around the world. Even in today's world of lightning-fast communications and internet technology, the seas continue to link the world community.

Indeed, even if globalisation is no longer solely driven by the maritime sector, world trade continues to be largely shipped by it; as we all know, the vast majority of goods traded worldwide are seaborne. The rapid growth of emerging economies such as China and India offers exciting opportunities for shipping and related activities.

Europeans play a prime role in global markets, controlling about 40% of the world merchant fleet. We need to be able to continue to rely on modern, efficient and competitive ports. European firms are leaders in the organisation of logistics chains. We must help them to stay in the lead. Although European shipbuilding has lost overall market share, we are still leaders in building sophisticated types of ships, such as cruise ships, icebreakers, offshore supply vessels, and many more. We must provide an environment in which they can continue to lead the world through innovation. And we must do this because maritime transport and its related sectors are crucial in steering our entire economy forward.

But let us not forget the many other economic activities related to the oceans, which provide sustainable livelihoods to our citizens. Sea-related recreation and tourism are just as important for our economy. We must ensure that they can continue to grow and provide both new jobs and an attractive quality of life for all those living in our coastal regions – and one European in two lives within 50 kilometres of the sea.

Extraction of raw materials or energy from the seas is another growth area. Offshore activity accounts for an important share of oil and gas production. It also accounts for an increasing share of our production of renewable energy through offshore wind, and the promising new area of wave energy. ‘Blue’ biotechnology shows great promise for the development of a series of new products. And what we invent for Europe, we can sell to the rest of the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We need to realise this economic potential. There is much pessimism about Europe’s economic future. The GDP growth rates of European economies are still disappointing and we simply cannot accept a figure of 19 million unemployed in the European Union. Our performance looks weak when compared with some competitors worldwide.

That is why the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs is of central importance to this Commission. It is vital that we narrow the growth gap between Europe and the rest of the world, if we are to face up to the twin challenges of growing global competition and demographic pressures. One way of doing that is by putting fresh emphasis on knowledge and innovation, and by taking full advantage of what we do best. And maritime affairs is an area where Europeans do well. Very well!

Because of this, we are analysing all our policies and activities linked with the oceans to see how we can extract more economic and social benefit from them in a sustainable manner.

Of course, we are not really moving into uncharted waters here. We have been dealing with maritime questions for many years under a range of policies such as industry, transport, fisheries, or regional policy. For example, within our environment policy, we have just adopted proposals to ensure that all EU marine waters are environmentally healthy by 2021. Similarly we are adopting a new maritime safety package, to update our defences against accidental pollution of our seas.

So the new maritime policy will have to work around what exists, and also add value to ongoing work.

I have therefore asked Commissioner Borg (whom I thank for his personal commitment and energy) to steer the new Maritime Policy Task Force, which brings together the seven Commissioners whose portfolios touch upon maritime affairs.

But of course this is not enough. We are very conscious that many elements of a future integrated policy already exist at EU and Member State level, and we have no desire to reinvent the wheel. With this in mind, we have set up a group of experts from our Member States to help us. Joe Borg and the Task Force have had numerous contacts with stakeholders in order to listen to their suggestions and share our own ideas. I have to say that I am struck by the interest in what we are doing, the enthusiasm shown for our integrated approach and by the number and quality of contributions which we have received. We intend to make these available on our website in the coming months.

The next stage of this work will be to draft a Green Paper on a future maritime policy for the Union, which should be adopted by the Commission in the first half of 2006.

This will constitute a first step towards a wider, more public debate on an all-embracing EU Maritime Policy. Such a debate is necessary for several reasons.

First, after the double 'no' to the European Constitution, it is more important than ever to engage in a dialogue with our citizens about what Europe is for, and what it can and should be doing.

Second, we are very conscious of the complexity of the task we are undertaking. On the one hand we need to be creative. On the other hand our proposals must be grounded in reality. We need the expert input of those who spend their lives in the maritime world. We hope that the business community will play a vigorous role in this process.

Third, it will take time and much public discussion to overcome the habit of looking at maritime activities in a narrow sectoral way. Experience in Canada and Australia suggests that it can take years for the idea of integrated action to take root.

It is our belief that it is precisely the interactions between different maritime activities that we must understand if we are to make sense of our relations with the oceans and maximize the benefits we derive from them.

So, after the publication of the Green Paper and the completion of a vigorous and wide-ranging debate, the European Commission will put forward proposals for a future Maritime Policy that are both solidly grounded in reality and based on a broad public consensus.

We are now at the start of this journey. A journey that will lead to a new European vision for the oceans and the seas. So this conference comes at a perfect moment. It represents an important opportunity for all of us to share our ideas and exchange views and experiences.

That is why I wish you a good and fruitful discussion, and I hope that after the publication of the Green Paper in the first semester of 2006, we will be able to advance the debate even further.

Thank you.