

Closing address given by Mr Cesare Damiano, Chairman of the Committee on Public and Private Sector Employment of the Chamber of Deputies, on the occasion of the Forum on Social Rights in Europe,

Turin, 18 March 2016

First of all, I wish to convey the best wishes of the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Laura Boldrini, who is unable to participate in our proceedings and has asked me to give this closing address on her behalf.

I would also like to express the Chamber of Deputies' gratitude to the other two institutions which helped organise the Inter-parliamentary Conference and the Forum on Social Rights: the City of Turin and its Mayor, Piero Fassino, and the Council of Europe, represented here by the Deputy Secretary General, Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni.

Through their joint efforts, the three institutions have launched a highly significant political process. Thanks to the results of these two days in Turin and the preceding conference, which took place in October 2014, that which is known as the "Turin Process" has indeed become a key stimulating and mobilising factor for social policies in Europe.

The opening speeches of the Forum, delivered by two leading figures of the European political science scene, Professor Fitoussi and Professor De Schutter, provided us with contributions of great depth, which did not fail to highlight all the problematic aspects of the situation of social rights within our continent. The debate which followed further enriched this picture. I do not intend to summarise the terms of this interesting debate here. I will merely confine myself to a few general considerations, drawing inspiration from some of the topics that have emerged during the rich discussions held over these last few days.

As was noted during the debate, one of the many effects of the economic crisis of recent years, which began in 2008, has undoubtedly been an increased fragmentation of the social rights protection system in Europe, and an undermining of the level of those rights. It is necessary to avoid the Charter becoming an aspiration for a Europe which

does not exist. There is a risk that we engage in abstract discussions about the political choices of governments and of Europe, the political Europe we do not have. Today, in the countries of Europe, the levels of protection granted to workers are significantly more varied than in the past. Whereas before we consistently strove to set social protection standards reflecting best practices in Europe, that objective was never attained. The opposite has occurred. For the most part, this is clearly a result of the way in which political responses to the crisis have been conceived up to the present day. Should we not acknowledge that the austerity policies have failed? If we continue to insist on austerity policies, we will be unable to envisage a social Europe. There is a contradiction here. The fruit of the political decisions is inequality. It was the liberal thinking which dominated the world for the last forty years that influenced the government decisions that led us to this highly contradictory situation. Fortunately, there also is the Charter. In the eurozone, in particular, it is no longer possible to utilise monetary stimulus, and the adaptation measures have mainly had an impact on the labour market and levels of social protection, which now serve as a relief valve in view of the impossibility of adjusting the value of the currency to take account of the countries' levels of competitiveness.

This has had decidedly negative consequences, such as the emergence of unacceptable inequalities between workers from different European countries, with a resulting resumption of large-scale internal migration. More generally, the perception of the European Union as indifferent to people's needs and incapable of developing common forms of protection for workers has become increasingly widespread. Eurosceptic sentiments have been nurtured by this climate and have brought about a further decline in the cohesive elements of European unification, which constitute an essential characteristic of our identity and of our culture.

In this context, I consider that measures such as those provided for in the recent agreement reached by the European Council to prevent the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union do not constitute a step in the right direction. The commendable aim of encouraging the United Kingdom to remain a member of the

European Union is being pursued by introducing severe restrictions on workers' mobility and decreasing the level of social protection for new arrivals on British soil, thereby fuelling inequality between those who are European citizens and those who are not.

If we really want to end this crisis, I believe that there are other ways forward and other political choices to be made. The European Union needs an effective revitalisation of development policies, but this recognition must have consequences. We need to overcome the politics of austerity, the blind and absolute rigour which transforms the, albeit necessary, squaring of accounts into a tool for regulating social relationships. The European Union needs appropriate investments in improving infrastructure, promoting scientific and technological research, and enhancing service delivery in a number of crucial sectors such as health and education. This is the only way we can generate quality jobs and avoid the temptation of responding to global competition by levelling down social protection measures. At this juncture, I would like to go back to a question Professor Fitoussi asked earlier: What is modernity? Is it unregulated competition? Is it the deification of the almighty market? Is it commodifying the value of work? I do not believe that these are modernity. To have a truly social modern society, one still characterised by social relations as the dominant feature of European culture, we need to fight a political, philosophical and even cultural battle. To this end, the EU member States must give strong support to the foundation of the "European pillar of social rights", as launched by President Juncker in his speech on the state of the European Union in September 2015. Europe's ambition should indeed be to obtain a "social triple A" rating by ensuring that labour markets and social protection systems operate on a fair and equal footing in all the member States of the European Union. Implementing this European pillar of social rights involves guaranteeing equal opportunities and labour market access, ensuring equal working conditions by striking an appropriate balance between workers' and employers' rights and obligations, and developing high-quality essential services. However, I am also saying that we have to challenge the concept of social dumping. If we fail to achieve these objectives and to strike a balance between

workers' interests and those of business, at a time when the priority is a low-cost workforce, the healthy, transparent and competitive companies will be penalised in favour of companies which are not.

The Social Charter of the Council of Europe provides a fundamental reference point in these efforts. I consider it very significant that today, here in Turin, we are celebrating the depositing of the instrument of ratification of the European Social Charter by the Minister of Labour, Social Security and Social Solidarity of the Hellenic Republic. This is an act of great political significance which demonstrates the growing importance of the Charter, particularly for the countries which have been more severely affected by the social consequences of the crisis of recent years and the austerity measures, countries which have shown their economic limits and have experienced the negative impact on employment and social cohesion. I'll say it again: let's challenge the politics of austerity, let's boost employment through investment. The Social Charter should also address the future of social systems in Europe. Why not set ourselves an objective of making our social systems more flexible in order to support an economic revival and, through employee turnover, young people's entry into the labour market? As things stand, there is a generational bottleneck. Once again, I'd like to quote Professor Fitoussi on the topic of modernity. I am thinking of Italy's future. In thirty years' time – it sounds like a long time, but we know that time flies – the retirement age in Italy will be close to 70. I'd like to know what is so modern about retiring at the age of 70 while keeping our children and grandchildren unemployed at home. Taking the Charter rights seriously therefore means developing a common, exhaustive protection framework, capable of incorporating the guarantees afforded, in a very selective way, by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The action of the European Committee of Social Rights has to be supported so as to give effect to the rights guaranteed by the Charter. Through uniform application of the Charter, effective advances must be made regarding the principle of the indivisibility of all civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights within the common European area. This is certainly a programme that will be difficult to implement and which will meet with resistance and obstacles. To overcome this, I

believe that the political strength of national parliaments, the direct representatives of European citizens, will be indispensable. In my opinion, these two days in Turin, with the participation of MPs from the Council of Europe member States and representatives of civil society, have provided a fresh impetus for the creation of a sufficient critical mass to take on these significant challenges. It is accordingly important to distinguish between the governmental and the parliamentary dimensions, while at the same time ensuring they are united, even more so in the realm of social rights, whose realisation affects fundamental human rights, starting from the right to live in dignity. As also highlighted during the Inter-parliamentary Conference, due attention must be paid to the theme of migrants, which was discussed at length yesterday. A European Council meeting is taking place in Brussels this very day on this delicate issue, which has taken on momentous dimensions, not only because of the Syrian crisis which has displaced millions of people from the East to the West, but also, let us not forget, because of the huge mass of people migrating from North Africa towards the Italian and Greek coasts, which are the most exposed due to their geographical nature. In this respect, I would like to remind you of Italy's great commitment to addressing this issue, which has endured for many years now. This is an unprecedented phenomenon of enormous proportions. To escape wars, dictatorships and famine, millions of people will be on the move in future. Europe should establish a sort of new Marshall Plan for Africa, because if we do not invest in roads, hospitals and schools, namely the infrastructure required to modernise these countries and facilitate quality development for them, we will not stop the exodus of migrants. Implementing the Charter today, as the Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, has said, means building bridges, not walls, so as to obtain tangible results. Implementing the Charter therefore means not just implementing national policies, but devising joint actions to confront common challenges. And this is not what is happening. One last point I feel I must make is to draw attention to the importance of social policies also as a means of combating radicalisation, which fosters the spread of terrorist propaganda. Social inclusion, let us not forget, is also becoming a tool for the construction of a solidarity-based society which leaves no room for dangerous forms of marginalisation. I would like to conclude by saying that this is an ambitious work

programme and one not easy to put into effect. However, it is worth the effort to fight this battle in order to perpetuate the idea of a social and inclusive Europe.