

Vice-Eerste Minister en
Minister van Werk, Economie en
Consumenten, Belast met
Buitenlandse Handel



Vice-Premier Ministre et
Ministre de l'Emploi, de l'Economie et
des Consommateurs, Chargé du
Commerce Extérieur

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TOESPRAAK DOOR KRIS PEETERS

VICE-EERSTE MINISTER EN

MINISTER VAN WERK, ECONOMIE, CONSUMENTENZAKEN,
BELAST MET BUITENLANDSE HANDEL

Conference on the Future of the protection of social
rights in Europe
13 februari 2014

Ladies and gentlemen,

For over 50 years, the European Social Charter has been a shining light for all those who want to establish a reassuring and bright future for our continent. Together with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, it provides guidelines on how to create a society that is able to support all of its citizens. These charters truly are cornerstones of modern day democracy.

At the same time, we are aware that we do not yet fully live up to the principles outlined in these documents.

In the past few years, the crisis that has been raging through Europe, has put pressure on the application of social rights. Not everyone can benefit today of the right to work and the right to social protection.

This is something we have to change. Economic recovery can go hand in hand with social progress. We should therefore focus on implementing current rights. Demanding new ones is difficult in this context. We should ensure that budgetary constraints and the need for economic reform do not stand in the way of social rights for all our citizens.

First and foremost, it is therefore essential that we stick to our commitments. The Treaties that have been democratically adopted by our Parliaments, have to be applied fully and

faithfully. Those who attack the credibility of judges and experts who try to uphold the Treaties, attack the very fabric of our democracy.

In that respect, we have to take account of the contributions by human rights bodies. They challenge us by asking governments the right questions. And they give us perspective, looking for convergence with other international human rights instruments.

Criticizing these bodies is not the right way forward. It merely targets the messenger. Instead, we need to take account of the clear messages we receive. Belgium therefore hopes that more Member States will commit to the *Turin Process* that was launched in October last year. We need a more coherent picture of ratifications by EU Member States of the Revised European Social Charter.

I am happy to announce in that respect that Belgium has fulfilled a number of formalities and has finalized necessary consultations, so we can now lift some reserves we still maintained on a number of articles and paragraphs of the revised Charter.

Moreover, our understanding of what these Treaties mean, should be more coherent. If our interpretation is not coherent, neither will be our policies. I know this is a controversial argument. And don't get me wrong, there is a need for interpretation, because the texts on social rights were all negotiated and approved in a historical context.

But as Minister for Employment - who is constantly negotiating with social and political partners, both at home and abroad - I need stable interpretations. On a day to day basis, we discuss issues such as the appropriate compensation for youth in training, decent working time, fair wages or the system

of social benefits. On all of these issues, we need realistic orientations that are based on credible reference data. These orientations should be internationally agreed upon and updated. They should be based on the best policies and practices in the different Member States.

The real danger in Europe today would be a sense of doubt about the final meaning of core principles and rights at the forefront of our treaties. No other continent has adopted that many texts of high political, legal, moral and social value, as we have done so far.

Yesterday, Commissioner Marianne Thyssen and Secretary-General Jagland already shared their commitment to these common values and the way they implement this inside the European Commission and the Council of Europe. It is our common duty to join forces and strengthen cooperation on all institutional levels. Our

common goal should lie in making social rights a basic reality to all European citizens.

The European Social Charter was clearly a source of inspiration of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. So when using these instruments, let's make sure they are coherently applied. I understand, in this respect, suggestions will be made in the *Document of Brussels*. So I very much look forward to that report.

Moreover, more impact assessments of the proposals of the EU Commission referring to them would be meaningful. The instruments of the Council of Europe are also useful for the dialogue with countries outside the EU, looking for an approximation with our standards.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we come to the end of this Conference, I am sure you will all agree that your work in the past two days brings great added value to the *Turin Process*. A process that started last year

with the very successful conference in that beautiful Italian city. The conference that produced a rich General Report that we received shortly before this conference.

The *Turin Process* has become an integral part of the greater story that the European Social Charter has been writing for 55 years. This story is one of enlargement, of new adhesions, of historical conferences that created new developments to an issue of great importance.

We have witnessed milestones such as the *Revised European Social Charter* and the *Protocol introducing a procedure of collective complaints*. This Treaty provides NGO's with access to the Charter, increasing its democratic value and offering less costly procedures.

These are substantial steps in the right direction. And I can tell you that our Presidency will continue to explore all practical and useful ways to improve social rights and to boost cooperation.

We want to promote solidarity and strengthen expertise. Solidarity and expertise are crucial drivers for the improvement of social rights in a world that is changing faster than it ever did before. We observe, for instance, large migration flows by people escaping war and poor human rights conditions. We have to provide appropriate opportunities and sustainable economic and social conditions to them.

This is an issue we are all dealing with. That is why we have to show solidarity and exchange expertise. There is no added value in naming and shaming bad pupils. On the contrary, we have to increase good governance in a positive manner, throughout the different European Institutions and Organisations. This has to lead to a broad access of social rights. It has to bring trust and greater social cohesion.

That is the common goal we share. That is what should be our ambition. That is the chapter our generation has to write in the longstanding history of European social rights.

I thank the organizers of this conference, the council of Europe and the European Commission for their support in this process.

I thank you.