

Brussels, May 2004

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We hope that the following report will give you an overview of the European social policy between 1999 and 2004 and show you that in this area too the European People's Party is highly competent and actively contributing to shape policy.

"The EPP states its claim to remain the strongest political force on the European stage. This requires us to be more clearly the party of the social market economy, the party for entrepreneurs as well as for employees."

(from a resolution passed by the EPP Congress in Estoril, 2002)



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COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
5th parliamentary term 1999-2004

The fight against unemployment remains the highest priority despite the successes achieved in some Member States. More and more time is being devoted at each Summit to debating possible suitable strategies. Increasingly comprehensive recommendations for action to combat unemployment are linked to the requirements resulting from the internal market with a single currency. The Lisbon Summit sought to pave the way for the technological renewal of Europe. The Heads of State and Government of the EU considered that state investment in education, research and infrastructure, a further liberalisation of the market and a reform of social security systems would all serve to this end.

By 2010, the EU should be the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economic area in the world. The committee rendered these general demands more specific, called for measures to eliminate gender-based differences as regards pay and access to the labour market, improved cooperation between all those concerned

in the labour market whilst at the same time preventing the termination of the Stability Pact in favour of measures to promote employment, the additional taxation of enterprises and the concentration of employment policy measures on only a few priority points so that the guidelines are now grouped as follows: (1) improvement of employment capacity, (2) development of entrepreneurship, (3) promotion of the adaptability of undertakings and of their workforce, (4) strengthened measures to promote equal opportunities.

The discussion on the reform of social security systems also played an important role in relation to the implementation of the decisions taken at Lisbon. In this connection, the demands which, as far as the EPP was concerned went too far, for a harmonisation of social provisions in all Member States, a minimum salary and a minimum pension for all, as well as a shortening of the working time, were rejected. Moreover, it was possible to ensure that the modernisation of social security schemes took account of the following guiding principles: work must be made worthwhile again, incomes must be consolidated, pensions must be assured on the basis of a pension system that is financially viable in the long term, social inclusion must be promoted, and affordable high-quality health care must be guaranteed. Supplementary old age pensions are proposed as a complement with specific regulations at European level on the supervision of pension funds, the elimination of obstacles to the freedom of movement of workers and on adjustments to take account of demographic developments.

Encouraged by the decisions of the Lisbon Summit, the committee also focused its attention on the quality and long-term viability of jobs and of the work on offer. This is not merely a matter of high-quality equipment at the workplace but also of working conditions, notably how to better reconcile the demands of work and family life, and how to make it easier for older workers to remain on the labour market. Particular attention was paid to improving the working time directive and the integration of professions which have not hitherto been covered by the scope of this directive, through the regulation on working time in road transport and with the conditions for temporary workers. In this connection also, efforts have been made to improve health and safety at the workplace. Directives were adopted concerning: protection against exposure to asbestos at the workplace, protection against vibrations and noise and minimum requirements for the use of work equipment and to prevent falls whilst working in high places.

The effort to improve the quality of work on offer centred essentially on the areas of education and training. In order to achieve the objective of a knowledge-based economy, the committee demands that education and training systems be rendered more effective and the shortcomings in quality as regards information and communication technology be remedied. In view of the rapid technological change and the intensive global competition, this necessitates a lifelong learning programme requiring financial incentives.

In order to achieve a significant improvement in the living conditions of the poorest households, which often include single parents, and to promote social integration, an action programme was adopted with a budget of EUR 75 million to promote cooperation between the Member States in combating social exclusion. Further efforts were also made to eradicate discrimination based on race or ethnic origin.

The committee would like action to be taken against discrimination not only in the areas of education, employment, social protection and healthcare with a concomitant right to compensation for victims of discrimination, with the burden of proof falling on the accused to demonstrate that they did not behave in a discriminatory manner, but also against discrimination on the basis of age, religion or philosophical belief, handicap or sexual orientation. Particular attention should be paid to guaranteeing unhindered access to work and vocational training and equal treatment as regards working conditions, notably pay and redundancies.

The committee also dealt with the social agenda put forward by the Commission which was to be implemented in a five-year period starting in 2001. The aim was to achieve a synergetic effect of economic, employment and social policy. The committee was particularly keen to strengthen the role of social policy as a productive factor, to tackle economic and social change, to achieve an adjustment to the new working environment and to create more and better jobs. For this reason, the social agenda encompasses issues, objectives and possibilities for implementation, which had been discussed by the committee in the past few years in the areas of employment, technical and social evolution, social security and social equity. The following are seen as suitable means for achieving these objectives: coordination of national policy (open coordination), appropriate legal provisions, the use of structural funds and social dialogue. Analyses, research projects and mainstreaming should also be used as accompanying measures according to best practice.

The committee also dealt intensively with the consolidation of Regulation 1408/71 on social security schemes. In this regard, it was able to extend the scope to cover all persons migrating within the Community and to simplify existing legal provisions, definitions and concepts and ensure that medical care can also be obtained by pensioners in the Member State in which they worked. It was also possible to avoid an EU-wide recognition of same-sex partnerships and the extension of the concept of family as well as the granting of EU citizens' rights to third-country nationals.