

## **Speech by Mrs Bonino, at the closing session of the Assembly of Consumer Associations in Europe.**

Although unable to bid you welcome two days ago at the opening of this Assembly, I would like now to express my sincere thanks for the excellent work which you have accomplished, the results of which are now known to you.

As the representatives of a community of more than 370 000 000 consumers, your presence here symbolises a heightened sense of awareness and of joint responsibility.

The Commission is a firm believer in the need for and the importance of gatherings such as this one, providing an opportunity to get a dialogue going and to have a lively exchange of views; your discussions and the resulting conclusions are proof of this.

The holding of this Assembly prefigures your new responsibilities under the Amsterdam Treaty, due to enter into force shortly.

I can assure you that the Treaty, and in particular Article 153 thereof, will constitute the starting point for new initiatives which the Commission intends to take in the field of consumer protection, with the aim of:

giving consumers more say in matters;  
assuring them of greater health and safety protection;  
safeguarding their economic interests.

There is no doubt that we need you to work together with us in order to achieve these objectives.

Before sharing with you my thoughts on some of the conclusions reached in the course of the Assembly, I would like to draw your attention to two major aspects of consumer life which will be of great importance to all of us in the immediate future.

The issues in question are:

### 1. Introduction of the euro

This will be an important event both for Europe and for consumer organisations.

You have not been wholly satisfied with the existing legislation, in particular as regards dual pricing prior to the introduction of the coins and notes, and the additional costs which that may entail for consumers; nevertheless, under the auspices of the Commission, agreement has been reached between consumer associations and professionals in the commerce, tourism and craft trade sectors on a code of conduct with a "Eurolabel" seal of approval.

I expect this agreement to provide an acceptable solution to a matter which, in the end, will be of transient significance during the introduction of the euro.

It only remains to be seen how far the positive elements of the dialogue resulting in this agreement can be applied to other sectors.

## 2. Food safety

This is a highly complex issue, with environmentally-sound agricultural practices being a key area of concern.

There is no doubt that consumers want their food to be safe, and to have a wide variety of choice for everyone.

In this respect, consumers' needs and expectations vary, going far beyond just a question of value for money.

The Commission is aware of these expectations and is endeavouring to satisfy them by:

improving, rationalising and simplifying the existing legislative framework, with a view to reducing the element of risk as far as possible; monitoring more closely the application of the legal provisions; providing more relevant information to consumers throughout Europe.

As far as consumer information is concerned, I would like to take this opportunity to remind you of the European information campaign on food safety which was launched last month, on 15 October, in partnership with the competent organisations in the Member States; it is now up and running in the 15 countries.

This campaign, underpinned by a code of safety and sound food hygiene practices, targets a wide audience.

Although the campaign focuses on the general public, we must not lose sight of the fact that consumers alone are not responsible for the safety of the food they eat; both industry and agriculture, as well as the public authorities, shoulder a large part of the responsibility.

In this area, therefore, nothing less than transparency at all levels and a pooling of effort will reassure consumers that everything is being done to obtain untainted products and thus to restore their confidence.

Over and above the problem of information, food safety is without doubt a priority for consumer policy.

The revamping of Health and Consumer Protection Directorate-General and of the Food and Veterinary Office provides a clear indication of the Commission's intent in this regard.

The consumer policy action programme for the next few years will highlight even more the priority given to the health and aspirations of consumers.

It is clear, though, that there is no such thing as "zero" risk in relation to foodstuffs, but we must do everything possible to minimise the risk.

In the interest of food safety, there has to be close interaction and partnership, from foodstuff production through to consumption, between European and national public authorities, agriculture, industry, the distributive trade and consumers.

The Member States must take all the necessary measures to ensure that the Community rules are observed on their territory.

The main challenge facing the food industry is to safeguard consumers' freedom of choice and to apply "proportionality" in relation to the actual needs of consumers.

These considerations in the food sector lead me to the question of CAP reform.

I share your view that the proposed reform is a step in the right direction but still does not wholly satisfy the legitimate expectations of the consumer.

As matters stand, the Commission is hoping that a consensus can be reached within the Member States for moving ahead with the proposed reform. As you know, there is strong resistance to it.

For my part, I shall see to it that consumers' concerns are more fully reflected in the action programme for the next three years in connection with agricultural policy reform; this will, of course, include your concerns about the safety of foodstuffs and the development of controls at all stages of the production process.

In line with your wishes, I shall strive to ensure that the farming support system is geared more towards direct aid, subject to environment-friendly and product-quality criteria.

Also, I share your desire for transparency, particularly as regards the cost to the consumer of the CAP; I and my colleagues within the Commission shall look at ways of carrying out regular impact studies concerning the actual cost and the impact of agriculture-related measures on the consumer.

From the point of view of passing price reductions on to consumers and monitoring prices all along the line, I have informed Commissioner Fischler of my readiness for and interest in any action which might be taken in this respect by my colleagues responsible for competition, industry and the retail trade.

As for the Assembly's deliberations on the Commission's three-year programme for consumer policy, I am pleased to note that the associations share our general outlook.

To be sure, as far as translating the objectives into specific initiatives is concerned, there may be different shades of opinion on either side: you tell us that the plan is ambitious, but you want to add to it!

Some of you have spoken of "realism", a concept to which I fully subscribe. All the more so since the scope of our resources is fixed for the

next five years. We must therefore get by as best we can, making the fullest use of the available resources at European and national level. My approach will be realistic and pragmatic, particularly since the incorporation of consumer policy into other policies is one of my priorities. It will be a question of taking things one step at a time, and we shall need your support in the form of pressure and lobbying.

Just a word about dialogue, in view of the confusion which exists. I agree that dialogue must not be an alibi or excuse for failure to legislate. May I just say, though, that there are times when legislation does not happen, and we need to ask ourselves whether it is better to have nothing at all or self-regulation in some form or other.

Having said that, I would like to repeat that dialogue is, in my view, a process whereby both parties can gain a better understanding of the problems at issue. Moreover, should the dialogue result in the adoption of rules or codes of conduct, this must be achieved through negotiation with consumers, making provision for follow-up instruments and for sanctions to be applied to those who, having given an undertaking, fail to abide by it.

This is the "philosophy" of dialogue which I am advocating at Commission level.

The Assembly's conclusions on the role of consumer associations in the light of the Amsterdam Treaty need to be fleshed out as and when Article 153 is implemented.

As I have said, that Article recognises for the first time the right of consumer associations to organise themselves in order to safeguard their interests.

I believe that the important political aspect of this instrument and this new Article could result in effective participation by consumer associations in the decision-making process at both national and Community level.

To this end, meaningful progress could be made by means of suitable instruments and dialogue in the absence of legislation, e.g. on grounds of subsidiarity.

Without wishing to flatter you, you have achieved a great deal with your deliberations and forward thinking.

I welcome your efforts and assure you that your conclusions will be closely examined by my departments; I know that you will settle for nothing less!

Furthermore, I hope that this Assembly will be an annual event, providing an opportunity both to gauge the extent to which your suggestions and ideas have been put into practice and to address other aspects of our policy which we have to look closely at together.