

Speech by Mr Frécon
Tuesday 14 October 2014 – 1st Sitting

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Dear colleagues,

At this very moving moment for me, I would like to share a personal memory:

When I first entered this chamber 20 years ago to take up my seat in the Congress, I would never have thought that I would one day be President of our assembly.

I would never have imagined my career at the Congress either. This long journey has taken me from the French delegation to the chairmanship of the delegation, then to the Bureau of the Chamber of Local Authorities and the presidency of the Chamber and, lastly, the presidency of the Congress.

Of course, you have just accorded me a great honour, and I should like to thank you most warmly.

I must say, in all sincerity, that it is the ultimate accolade for a long career devoted entirely to local and regional authorities through all the posts which I have held in my own country, from the humblest such as municipal councillor, which I am today in my municipality of Pouilly-lès-Feurs, in the Rhône-Alpes Region, to the more prestigious such as member of the French Senate.

I should also like to extend particular thanks to my colleagues from the outgoing Bureau, and the long list of all those who have headed this assembly, including, above all, the outgoing President, Herwig van Staa, with whom I have had fruitful working relations for many years.

I witnessed the Congress at the very beginnings of its new statute, following the Summit of Heads of State and Government held in Vienna in 1994, and I can tell you – and especially our newest colleagues – that we have come a long way.

Firstly, from the point of view of the powers of the Congress and the way they are exercised.

And, secondly, from the point of view of the geographical reach of our work.

Here I am thinking, in particular, of the fact that we now work on the basis of a Charter of Local Self-Government which has been signed by all Council of Europe member states – we have just received the last signature, from San Marino – that the Charter is now applied increasingly broadly, especially with the gradual lifting of the reservations entered by states at the time of signature, and that the quality of our monitoring of the Charter has improved to such an extent that it has transformed the political weight of the Congress within the Council of Europe.

Everyone now agrees that the Congress operates responsibly and with restraint in the spirit of spreading the values of local and regional democracy as a constituent element of democracy itself.

Certainly, the situation in this respect is not perfect in many of our countries.

Certainly, progress is expected in some places and, in some cases, is even an absolute requirement.

However, I believe that, through the political dialogue it has established with governments and, here in Strasbourg, with the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the Congress is able to persuade central governments to establish and protect local and regional democracy more effectively throughout Europe.

Of course, the economic crisis affecting us all is a significant obstacle.

Of course, the separatist tensions which we are going to debate during this session are also substantial obstacles.

However, through our efforts, our commitment, our political clarity and also the courage to speak out loudly but calmly, we will be able to stand up for a positive approach to subsidiarity.

Here in this forum, in this Congress, we campaign for local and regional self-government. But we do not advocate violent forms of separatism or non-negotiated changes which ignore our countries'

internal rules or, worse still, violate the most widely recognised international laws. We campaign for self-government within appropriate parameters, based on national dialogue, with a view to moving towards better management of our regions on behalf of all our citizens. That is our credo and our *raison d'être*.

And, of course, I must say that I prefer the example of our Scottish friends, who conducted an exemplary national debate about their self-government and independence, in which everyone's views were respected in a spirit of genuine democracy, to that of the separatists in eastern Ukraine who have taken up arms against their central government.

It is up to us as members of the Congress to make this peaceful, democratic and responsible approach to self-government work in reality because, ultimately, that is the only Europe in which we want to live and which we want to pass on to our children.

It is in this spirit that I will exercise my office, seeking to give priority in our daily work to listening to people's views and ensuring the quality of the exchanges between our delegations.

Thank you once again for honouring me in this way.