A New Social Europe: our PES initiative
Opening Speech
Poul Nyrup Rasmussen

Friends, thank you for being here to participate in the first working session of our initiative on "The New Social Europe".

We are all deeply engaged in these pan-European questions, which will have a deep impact on living and working conditions in the future.

This new headline for our project, "The New Social Europe", is not a coincidence, it is fundamental because it concerns 19 million unemployed in Europe; 92 million of working age who are classed as economically inactive; it concerns 68 million in or near the limit of poverty. And it concerns all those who fear losing their jobs and not being capable of getting a new one, and those who fear for their security in the future, their social chances, who fear that their children and grand-children's education and job possibilities are threatened.

It's about connecting to people now and addressing fundamental questions: why should life expectancy in Latvia today be on average 10 years less than in France? These facts illustrate that in the EU we are confronted with a crucial choice: should we be guided by a narrow concept of competitiveness or should we be primarily guided by cohesion? Sometimes I hear people say that it's this choice: cohesion or competitiveness. For me, if we compare the EU with other regions, our competitiveness is cohesion. We will not be strong societies, if we are not inclusive societies, active societies. We will not be strong competitors, if we do not ensure that our people can get jobs, educate themselves, can re-skill.

These are the facts. Times have changed now: globalisation changes economic conditions everyday. It's not the globalisation we knew in the past, which brought about changes every 25 years and then stabilised for another period. It's a constant, accelerating change. It means that we have to change jobs far more than our parents did. Our children and grand-children will face this challenge of constant change. We know that people do not like change. Our job is to develop answers to people's worries and to ensure that in our Social Europe our societies survive and prosper in the twenty-first century. How we achieve that is our responsibility to define.

Jacques Delors is here by my side and I'm very happy that you have accepted to co-Chair this very important project with me. Jacques Delors is father of the Single Market, the Single currency. And now the question is the following: we have one market, one currency, should we then have twenty-five different social systems? Is that possible? How do we avoid a race to the bottom, with one market, one currency, but twenty-five different systems? We all know that we cannot aim for total harmonisation, that is not our goal. But we must invest our efforts now in defining how our values – social democratic values – will survive in this twenty-first century.

We must ensure that there will be jobs and opportunities for every citizen in our countries. Because we know that this whole theme, Social Europe, is ours. We could never have talked about Social Europe if we hadn't had socialist and social democratic parties over the past hundred years. Social Europe would not have existed. Therefore it is our duty, our responsibility, to try to develop a new roadmap. The way we intend to do it is to start off with practical work. Let me just describe how we are going to do this.

We are starting today by organising ourselves in three discussion forums: on the Active Society – all which concerns how to integrate people into the labour market, how to modernise our legislation, our social security and unemployment benefit system, so that we

can meet the new challenges of globalisation. It is a pleasure for me to announce that Hans Karlsson, Sweden's Minister of Labour, has accepted to chair this forum. Secondly, on the Inclusive Society – which will, I'm happy to say, be chaired by Stephen Timms, UK Minister for Work and Pensions. And thirdly, the EU dimension, which is our anchor to avoid a race to the bottom – I am pleased to announce that Anna Diamantopoulou, who has a deep insight into these questions, has accepted to chair this forum.

We have also appointed three rapporteurs. I'd like to welcome Marisol Pérez Domínguez, who will be rapporteur on the Inclusive Society forum. Angellica Schwall-Düren, member of the German Bundestag, will join us as rapporteur on the Active Society Forum and I am also happy to announce that Attila Mesterhazy, Political Secretary of State for the Ministry of Youth, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities in Hungary will join us on the EU dimension.

The plan is that these three discussion forums will start up today. From January to May, we will organise seminars in the member states with our member parties, so that our work is not concentrated in Brussels and we try to include people in our countries with our national parties. We foresee about two seminars for each discussion forum across Europe.

After this, we will take these discussions and present our thinking in a report that will be submitted to our Congress in the autumn of next year. It will then be up to the Congress to discuss. We aim to have a set of principles to give us a coherent answer to what is our Social Europe in the twenty-first century, which corresponds to our values, but is a dynamic, new approach.

With these words, I would now like to invite Jacques to take the floor and give us his thoughts at the beginning of this great exchange on defining our New Social Europe for the twenty-first century.