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Réception du Nouvel An des Entreprises

Mercredi, le 19 janvier 2005 à 17h00

Centre de Conférences
Complexe immobilier de la Chambre de commerce
Luxembourg-Kirchberg

Allocution de bienvenue de

M. CHARLES KROMBACH, Président FEDIL

EMBARGO, 19 janvier 2005 – 18h00

Seule l'allocution prononcée servira à être publiée

Son Excellence Monsieur Michael HOEY
Ambassadeur d'Irlande

Son Excellence Monsieur Pavol SEPELA'K
Ambassadeur de la République Tchèque

Son Excellence Madame Ingeborg KRISTOFFERSEN
Ambassadeur de Belgique

Son Excellence Monsieur Ferenc SZÖCS
Ambassadeur de Hongrie

Son Excellence Monsieur Walter HAGG
Ambassadeur d'Autriche

Son Excellence Monsieur Rui Alfredo De Vasconcelos
FELIX-ALVES
Ambassadeur du Portugal

Son Excellence Monsieur Ermanno SQUADRILLI
Ambassadeur d'Italie

Son Excellence Monsieur James F. CLARK
Ambassadeur du Royaume Uni

Son Excellence Monsieur Julio NUNEZ MONTESINOS
Ambassadeur du Royaume d'Espagne

Son Excellence Monsieur Gertjan STORM
Ambassadeur du Royaume des Pays-Bas

Mesdames, Messieurs les Représentants des
Ambassades de France, des Pays-Bas, de la Slovaquie et
de la Suède

Son Excellence Monsieur Jean-Claude JUNCKER
Premier Ministre

Monsieur François BILTGEN (?)
Ministre du Travail et de l'Emploi
Ministre de la Culture, de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de
la Recherche
Ministre des Cultes

Monsieur Jeannot KRECKE (?)
Ministre de l'Economie et du Commerce extérieur

Monsieur Jean-Louis SCHILTZ
Ministre de la Coopération et de l'Action humanitaire
Ministre délégué aux Communications

Monsieur Lucien WEILER
Président de la Chambre des Députés

Monsieur Laurent MOSAR
Vice-Président de la Chambre des Députés

Mesdames, Messieurs les Députés,

Monsieur Jacques SANTER
Président honoraire du Gouvernement

Madame Astrid LULLING
Députée au Parlement Européen

Madame Lydie POLFER
Députée au Parlement Européen

Monsieur Paul HELMINGER
Bourgmestre de la Ville de Luxembourg

Monsieur Wim KOK
Président du Groupe de Haut Niveau « Stratégie de
Lisbonne »
Anct. Premier Ministre des Pays-Bas

Mesdames, Messieurs,
Chers Membres,
Chers Invités,

Permettez-moi de vous souhaiter la bienvenue à notre réception du nouvel an des entreprises. Une réception, hélas, assombrie par le décès de la Grande-Duchesse Joséphine-Charlotte le 10 janvier dernier.

La vie de la Grande-Duchesse Joséphine-Charlotte se confond avec un demi-siècle d'histoire de notre pays. Pendant cette période, elle assista son époux, le Grand-Duc Jean, dans l'exercice de ses fonctions officielles, très souvent en relation avec le développement économique de notre pays.

Puis-je vous demander d'observer une minute de silence en mémoire de S.A.R. la Grande-Duchesse Joséphine-Charlotte.

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Le nouvel an, Mesdames, Messieurs, a aussi marqué le début de la présidence luxembourgeoise de l'Union Européenne, une présidence dont le calendrier a été bouleversé par les événements tragiques en Asie du Sud-est de fin 2004.

En mémoire des milliers de morts et de blessés qu'a faits le Tsunami, nous avons d'ailleurs décidé de renoncer au buffet traditionnel offert à l'issue des discours et de verser une somme équivalente à une organisation de bienfaisance. Je suis sûr que vous comprendrez cette décision et j'invite toutes nos entreprises membres à s'associer à ce geste de solidarité.

Au niveau européen, l'actualité des prochains six mois sera dominée par les discussions sur les dossiers importants se trouvant à l'agenda du Conseil. Je pense notamment à la réforme du Pacte de stabilité, à la « révision à mi-parcours » du Processus de Lisbonne ou encore à l'épineux dossier des perspectives financières.

Une présidence qui demandera dès lors un plein engagement du gouvernement et de l'administration, et surtout du Premier ministre, Monsieur Jean-Claude JUNCKER, à qui j'ai l'honneur de souhaiter la bienvenue parmi nous, ceci malgré les nombreuses obligations sur le plan national et sur le plan communautaire.

Monsieur JUNCKER, soyez remercié de tout cœur de votre présence. Nos meilleurs vœux vous accompagnent évidemment pour les mois à venir pendant lesquels le Luxembourg sera au centre des discussions européennes. Nous attendons évidemment avec impatience le message que vous allez adresser à nous tout à l'heure.

Ladies and Gentleman,

It will come as no surprise to you that the choice of this year's guest speaker is dictated by the European agenda.

I have the pleasure to welcome Mr Wim KOK, former Prime Minister of the Netherlands and distinguished expert on European policies.

Mr KOK has over the last year assumed the Chairmanship of two High Level Groups advising the European Commission and the Council on sensitive political issues. A first report named "Jobs, Jobs, Jobs" retained all our attention as it managed to rally social partners around proposals on how to improve employment prospects in Europe.

Furthermore, the European Council mandated Mr KOK to chair a High Level Group on the mid term review of the Lisbon Strategy. Mr Romain BAUSCH, CEO of SES-Global and member of the Board of FEDIL, participated in the elaboration of this report which draws a pessimistic picture of achievements so far.

Indeed, the results of the Lisbon Strategy, whose main objective is to make Europe the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, will be evaluated at the Spring Council in March. For the business community in Europe, it is the major topic of the Luxembourg Presidency and we look forward to the ideas of Mr KOK and Prime Minister JUNCKER on how to put Europe back on the path of growth and full employment.

Mr KOK, thank you for accepting our invitation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Making Europe a more attractive place for business needs to be the major concern of European and national leaders in the months and years to come. Only by becoming more competitive can Europe maintain its "social ambitions" and continue to lead the world in the field of environmental policies. As highlighted by Mr JUNCKER in his speech delivered at the European Parliament, the competitiveness is not a goal on its own or an abstract economic objective, but the only way to guarantee prosperity for all in Europe.

As outlined in the KOK report, the challenges the EU has to face are enormous. There is the demographic factor. The potential work force in Europe will fall by 18% in absolute terms by 2050, and the number of those aged more than 65 will increase by 60%.

On the other hand, the US is far ahead of us in various areas of the knowledge economy. China and India are

strengthening their competitive position vis-à-vis Europe at an ever faster rate. The threats of de-industrialisation and relocation by companies are hanging like a dark cloud over the European continent. This affects particularly one of the backbones of our economy, manufacturing industry, and we urge politicians to put industry back at the heart of policy concerns.

At the last UNICE business summit, the CEO of Arcelor, Mr Guy DOLLE emphasised this point by stating "Industry wants to stay in Europe, does Europe want industry to stay?".

There is no alternative to structural reforms in Europe, reforms that create more dynamism in the internal market and that make companies confident about the economic future of Europe.

In this respect, the KOK report rightly puts the focus on growth and employment.

How can Europe boost its global competitiveness? There are no miracle solutions. We all know the policies that need to be put in place in order to fulfil the Lisbon goals.

Let me quote the President of UNICE, Dr Jürgen STRUBE, who raised the following priorities at the Tripartite Social Summit in November:

- Improve the framework to make companies do more research and development.
- A renewed industrial policy to create a favourable framework for the global competitiveness of manufacturing industry in Europe, and at the same time to create a truly internal market for the services sector.
- A flexible labour market also based on effective life-long learning and employability policies to achieve the goals of the Lisbon strategy concerning

employment. This must be accompanied by a forceful reform of pensions and health care systems.

- Sound and predictable public finances, by fully respecting the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact.
- These policy priorities must be backed by actions on better regulation. On the national as well as on the EU level, efforts to simplify existing red tape must be intensified, and all new legislative proposals must be assessed for their potential impact on Europe's competitiveness.

I welcome in this respect the ambition of the Barroso Commission and the Luxembourg Presidency for improving Europe's competitiveness. But ambitions alone are not enough. Business wants member states to deliver on promises made.

Delivery on Lisbon means: Stop talking and start acting. Acting on EU level and – first and foremost - acting on the national level. The most important reforms must be implemented within member states. We therefore fully support the idea of the KOK Group to draw up national action plans and rank progress in the member states.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Luxembourg, perhaps more than in other EU Member States, national concerns greatly overlap with European concerns. This is true not only during the period of the Luxembourg Presidency, but also more generally.

The issue of corporate competitiveness is therefore not discussed only at European level, but at national level. The national debate started more than a year ago in the framework of the Tripartite Coordination Committee which decided in early 2004 to ask Professor Fontagné to draw

up a report on the competitiveness of the Luxembourg economy.

This report, entitled "A straw in the steel" was presented in December 2004 and, without containing new revelations, it is instructive thanks to the clarity of its findings. Let me give you some examples:

- Luxembourg is different in some respects, but not so different that the laws of the market do not apply;
- wage increases should be determined on the basis of labour productivity and not on the basis of consumer prices;
- wages have increased one and a half times more rapidly than the productivity of the Luxembourg economy.

This is why the independent expert concludes that "there could be a rude awakening if adjustments are not made rapidly and that the country's level of prosperity means that it is possible to tackle the problems upstream in order to preserve the social balance".

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that the Fontagné report will stimulate a wide debate on the issue of competitiveness and thereby bring it home to public opinion that we need in-depth reforms to secure jobs and prosperity prospects for all.

If we refuse to change our ideas and our habits in a world that is changing rapidly, if we continue to look inwards, the deterioration of our economic fabric, our companies' loss of competitiveness and, hence, the threat to our jobs, will only become worse.

It is therefore time to demonstrate lucidity and courage, and to urge our fellow citizens and political leaders, at all levels, to face up to reality. This reality is that we live in an ageing society, attached to comforts built up over the years, living beyond its means and rejecting all efforts to adapt and remain a competitive society.

In order to meet the challenges posed by globalisation of markets, Luxembourg, like other European countries, needs to accelerate its process of internal reform. The emphasis has to be placed on four sets of themes.

First public finances, where it is essential to close the gap between increases in state expenditure and economic growth. Better control of state spending is a necessary condition for maintaining a favourable fiscal environment for investment and employment.

A second theme that needs to be addressed is the cost of labour. It is important to reconsider the wage formation mechanism characterised by the automatic and full wage indexation which is the premise for collective bargaining. Employer organisations have suggested that a ceiling should be placed on indexation. We want to replace a system that can be described as elitist with a system that is more socially just and less of a financial burden for companies.

Third field for action: social security. In last year's New Year address by companies, I argued in favour of a new social policy, because the welfare state model as we currently know it, is not sustainable in the long term. We therefore need to reorganise the social state on the basis of a model in which statutory solidarity is complemented by more individual responsibility.

The cost of labour is significantly influenced by social contributions, which have been pushed up following the decisions taken by the general meeting of the union of sickness benefit funds last autumn.

The fourth theme I would like to address briefly is employment. Our absolute priority must be to get more people into work. "Making work pay", the term used in the employment guidelines and Wim KOK's report must guide our action in this area. We call on the government to eliminate disincentives to work by widening the difference between income from work and the various benefits paid to the unemployed.

Dear Guests,

2005, half-way through the Lisbon agenda, is a make-or-break year for Europe's competitiveness. I sincerely hope that this year will be the year of economic reform.

The year will also be marked by referendums in various countries on the European Constitution. FEDIL is in favour of this Constitution. It will improve the governance of the EU and make its decision-making more efficient, democratic and transparent. This will also contribute to a strengthening of Europe's competitiveness.

However, national campaigns should not distract attention from policy-making in Brussels. I share the views of our Prime Minister who fears member states will paralyse EU work in progress for the next eighteen months. Referendums can never be an excuse for governments not to proceed on the many urgent issues on the table in the various European institutions. I am sure that achieving results will bring Europe much closer to its citizens than a policy stand-still.. Again the business message to the capitals is one simple word: delivery.

I wish you all a successful New Year! Thank you very much.

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