

Opening remarks

## **" Senior citizens and a commitment to volunteering "**

### **Stefan Knafel**

President of the European Senior Citizens Union (ESCU)

As President of the ESCU, I would like to welcome all of today's conference participants and particularly our guests of honour.

The role of the ESCU is continually expanding because, without political transposition, nothing can be done for senior citizens in Europe.

The ESCU was created in Madrid in 1995.

At the Vienna Congress in 1996, we debated and adopted the 10-point Vienna Declaration. "Co-operation, Co-decision, Co-responsibility" were the keynotes of the congress. It resulted in:

- \* support for European unification, the foundation of peace and prosperity in Europe;
- \* support for intergenerational dialogue;
- \* support for a positive attitude to older persons.

These different points were developed further in 1999 and incorporated into a resolution adopted at the Cologne congress.

Conferences have also been held in Brussels, Strasbourg, Königswinter, Budapest and Preßburg on the following subjects:

- \* Protecting pension systems
- \* Combating discrimination against older persons
- \* Creating structures for the political integration and participation of older persons
- \* Integrating the Central and Eastern European countries

European NGOs working with older persons have been doing constructive work for years. Several projects and programmes have been debated and adopted. But experience has demonstrated that as good as certain ideas may be, their political implementation has not always produced the success expected of them. The role of the ESCU consists of using every means possible, in the EPP Group in the European Parliament and with the European Commission, to assert the interests of older persons. The integration of older Members in the European Parliament is an important initiative in this respect and Chairman Pöttering has made a promise to us in this connection as far as the EPP Group is concerned.

Today's conference in Brussels concerns an important subject, as its title indicates: "Senior citizens and a commitment to volunteering - An active social life as a source of health". It is important to make society and all political institutions aware that only the voluntary work of several thousands of persons will make it possible to preserve our social system. Volunteering must establish bridges with professional services because one does not replace the other. Our duty is to devote all our energy to guaranteeing a life of dignity for the elderly, whose numbers are increasing in Europe.

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