

Interview with Jerzy Buzek, President of the European Parliament

1. As the European Parliament returns after the summer recess what do you think the main projects and priorities are for the legislature 2009-2014? What issues are at stake in the short and mid-term?

Our first priority is to help tackle the global financial crisis. Although the world economy seems to be stabilising, and we are receiving good macrofinancial indicators from both the Euro zone and the United States, we can not be complacent. We need to continue our reforms so that the recovery is sustainable.

The Swedish Presidency has put as one of its priorities, getting citizens back to work. This is a priority of this Parliament. We need to look at how we can invest more in human capital, innovation, and new technologies. I believe the Union budget can help in this.

We must start to implement the Lisbon Treaty once it comes into force.

The Single Market is our great achievement and we need to not only preserve it, but also to extend it in order to continue to make Europe an open and competitive continent.

We need to concentrate in getting a common European position in the run-up to the United Nations Conference on Climate Change to be held in Copenhagen in December. The Parliament is going to be very active in the debate.

It is also time for us to start thinking about our common energy policy, so that we can guarantee our security. These are some of the big issues which will be addressed by this House in the coming months.

2. You have taken office at a key point in the institutional development of the EU. If the Lisbon Treaty is implemented what role could the European Parliament play in the new institutional structure?

Under Lisbon the Parliament becomes a true colegislator with the Council of Ministers. Our right of codecision is extended to such areas as agriculture, fisheries, external trade, and justice and home affairs. We also have far more competences as regards to the Budget of the Union, receiving for the first time equal powers in agricultural spending.

I believe this is a very positive development since it will create a better system of checks and balances, and will give a much stronger voice to Europe's citizens. We now have the tools to be more flexible in the allocation of funds to issues we support.

3. During the construction of Europe, the community institutions have enjoyed an influence that has been determined as much by the legislative texts as the personality and wishes of their leaders. As President of the European Parliament how would you like see this institution develop?

The Parliament is the only institution whose members are directly elected every five years, giving us a unique legitimacy in the institutional framework.

We need to improve our relations with the other EU institutions, specifically the European Commission and the Council of Ministers, in order to increase accountability and encourage better law-making.

I have already taken some steps in this direction. I have invited the President of the Commission to attend a one hour question and answer session at every plenary. I have also asked the 20 Parliamentary Committee Chairs to engage in a systematic stock-taking of outstanding legislative proposals so that a serious discussion on future policy can be had with Commissioners-designate during their confirmation hearings. I believe this will help strengthen parliamentary scrutiny of the Commission and increase the executive's responsibility to this Parliament.

4. Your term in office is due to end in 2012, in spite of the Treaty texts, thereby leaving your place to one of your social democratic colleagues, in virtue of the agreement made between the two main political groups in the European Parliament. What do you think of this custom and the employment of the consensus that this implies? Do you think it compatible with the need to bring the European citizen closer to the community institutions and of clarifying how these are run as revealed during the recent European elections?

The premise of your question is wrong. The post of President of the European Parliament lasts for 30 months. Then a new election for the job takes place. Even though the EPP won the elections and is the largest political party, it does not have an absolute majority in Parliament. No one Group has ever won such a majority. This is 'plurality rule' and not 'majority rule'. This reflects the views of Europe's citizens, and I believe it is beneficial, as the rights of the minority are always respected. In a Europe of 500 million citizens, coming from diverse regions, there will always be a number of cross currents, so a simple left-right political divide does not apply as such. In this Parliament, we try to find consensus wherever possible, and try to build a broad majority, in order to benefit all of Europe's citizens.

I am committed though to engaging more with the European public in order to start building a true European Demos. I believe this Parliament needs to be as transparent as possible so that people know how their laws are debated, amended and passed. One of my proposals is to bring satellite and web TV to our Committees and Delegations, opening them further to citizens' scrutiny.

5. The European elections of June last were organised on the basis of the Nice Treaty but part of the 2009-2014 legislature might take place according to the rules stipulated in the Lisbon Treaty. This is why a high share of public opinion believes that the next President of the European Commission should be appointed according to the rules set down in the Lisbon Treaty. What do you think of this?

We have taken the decision to hold a vote to elect the next President of the Commission in the September plenary session. This will be done under the Nice Treaty.

I have been a strong advocate of the Lisbon Treaty because I believe it is the best Treaty now for a Europe of twenty-seven. However, we need to respect the choice of the Irish people, and the will of the Presidents of Poland and the Czech Republic. Until such a time, we will operate under the current Treaty. This means that the next Commission will have to be appointed under Nice.

Once Lisbon is ratified, we will have to return to the institutional issue of the new Commission.

6. In spite of the Diet's undeniable support of the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty Polish President Lech Kaczynski would like to save his decision of ratifying until the Irish have voted again on the subject. Do you think that a "yes" – even a closely run one in the referendum on 2nd October - will be enough to convince the Polish President to sign the Treaty? And do you believe that the Czech President will follow the example set by his Polish counterpart then?

President Kaczynski has always displayed a great respect for democracy. He believes that we should allow the Irish people to make their own decision in a referendum; this is why he proposed to wait on the outcome of the vote. I have spoken to him about this. I am convinced that both President Kaczynski and President Klaus will ratify the Treaty once, and if, the Irish people vote 'yes'.

7. You are the first personality from a former Communist bloc country to rise to the position of President of the European Parliament. Do you see something symbolic in this?

This year we celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the political and economic transformations that happened across Central and Eastern Europe.

Twenty years ago, I never dreamt of being able to stand for the European Parliament, let alone become its President. I believe that my election has turned a page on a dark chapter in our common history. Today Europe is not only reunited, but integrated, and we are able to work on common solutions without the borders that divided us.

8. 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall we still identify the EU countries according to their belonging to the former east/west blocs, often comparing the "new" and the "old" Europe. Is this distinction still appropriate? Shouldn't we rather take an overall view of the various interlinking elements that distinguish us and yet which enrich a Union that is "united in diversity"?

I believe that in this Parliamentary term, perhaps partly due to my election, the term "old" and "new" will stop being used. Please remember that in 2007 we had two "new" members join us, and there now are others negotiating their accession. To them, we are all "old" member states.

I think the countries that joined five years ago have made enormous progress, and I believe that with every passing year, the differences due to our history, will fade. One only has to look at Spain and Portugal today, countries who were once "new", and who shared a similar history to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.