

**CITATION OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE SOCIETY
FOR THE CONFERRING OF THE INTERNATIONAL CHARLEMAGNE PRIZE OF AACHEN
HONOURING THE PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL
HERMAN VAN ROMPUY**

In tribute to his valuable services as a mediator and architect of consensus, as well as an important generator of European unity, the Board of Directors of the Society for the Conferring of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen honours in 2014 the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy. Pragmatic, forceful in action, with great integrity and ability to integrate, he renders in the performance of this newly-created office a major contribution to consolidating and further developing United Europe.

Herman Van Rompuy embodies in person the axiom that Europe must be worked for anew every day, and that it must have a vision.

The heads of European states and governments had long met together only on ceremonial occasions; but in 1974, some four decades ago, it was agreed to hold subsequent meetings under the designation “European Council”; and this council quite rapidly grew into the most important institution for addressing the EU’s basic policy aims and priorities. But 35 years would pass before on 1 December 2009 the Treaty of Lisbon made the Council one of the seven official bodies of the EU. The establishment, at the same time, of a permanent Chair of the European Council aimed (1) to counter the turnover in Europe’s leadership caused by semi-annually rotating Council presidencies, (2) to introduce continuity into the Council’s work, and (3) in addressing its partners in the world to give United Europe a face. As the first full-time President, Herman Van Rompuy shaped this office from the outset, becoming in the last four years one of Europe’s major crisis managers and idea-providers.

Herman Van Rompuy was born on 31 October 1947 in Etterbeek, neighbouring Brussels. After earning a bachelor of philosophy degree (1968) and an MA in applied economics (1971) at the Catholic University of Leuven, he started work at the Belgian national bank before taking his first post in the Belgian government in 1975, serving as advisor in the cabinet of Leo Tindemans, then Prime Minister and later Charlemagne Prize laureate; in 1978 he joined the cabinet of Finance Minister Gaston Geens. From 1980 to 1988 he headed the Center for Political, Economic and Social Studies, besides taking on teaching assignments at the Antwerp business school (1980-1987) and at the Vlaamse Economische Hogeschool in Brussels (1982-2008).

He began his political career as vice chairman of the CVP youth organization (1973-1977); by 1978 he was already a member of the national party bureau, and ten years later he became chairman of the Christian Democrats. In the same year he joined the Belgian Senate and served briefly as state secretary for finance and small and medium business (May-September 1988). In September 1993 he joined Jean-Luc Dehaene’s cabinet as vice prime minister and budget minister, serving until 1999. In this capacity he was able, by substantially reducing the state deficit, to make a decisive contribution to his country’s accession to the euro zone. In 1995 he won a seat in the House of Representatives, an office that he kept when his party was relegated to the opposition four years later. In 2004 he received the honorary title of “Minister of State”, and in 2007 he was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives.

After the fall of the short-lived Yves Leterme government, Van Rompuy – who had never sought the post and who had in the 1990s once turned it down – was sworn in by Albert II as prime minister in December 2008, amid the kingdom’s gravest crisis in recent history. While

unable to bring about a permanent solution of the bitter feud between the Flemish and the Walloons, in a very short time he succeeded in organizing constructive cooperation in the ultra-fragile five-party coalition, and in securing for the country a period of political stability at a time when a break-up appeared conceivable. “It was this performance record that caused the other EU ‘bosses’ to make him the regular chairman of the Brussels Round Table” (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 18 Oct. 2012). It came nonetheless as a surprise to many observers that after less than a year in office as head of government, Van Rompuy was named the first full-time president of the European Council at a special Council summit on 19 November 2009; on 1 December, less than two weeks later, he officially took up the office newly created by the Treaty of Lisbon.

Pursuant to the statutes, the president of the European Council represents the EU externally, looks after preparations, presides over the work of the Council, and reports to the European Parliament on the Council’s meetings. In this way he is to “drive forward” the Council’s work, to give it “continuity” and to foster “cohesiveness and consensus”.

Van Rompuy’s special strength is building consensus. After all, in his work to date extending over three decades, he has gained the reputation of a politician of great diplomatic skill, focused on achieving settlements – a man who as his party’s negotiator was instrumental in the forming of no fewer than eight cabinets. “Listening to people, having empathy for the other person’s perspective, trying to find a middle course, that is a way to behave. Possessing this is very helpful when one works in this place as Council President.”

It is however not only the ability to compromise and the attendant pragmatism that characterize this Belgian. What crystallized very quickly after his taking office was an advantage Van Rompuy brought with him that had virtually escaped public notice at the time of his appointment: He is one of the Council members with a very broad and solid background of economic education and training. Thus he is now highly esteemed not only as a moderator and architect of consensus; he has also and above all crucially helped to shape the Council’s work as a generator of impetus and ideas.

As early as the first half of 2010, at the summits he convened, measures were adopted to boost Greece and ensure the stability of the euro; and at the suggestion of the Commission a new growth and jobs strategy (“Europe 2020”) was agreed. During the crisis, says Van Rompuy in retrospect, they “built a lifeboat at sea. In a stormy situation, that was no mean feat. However, it was clear to all of us that we needed to draw the right lessons for the future. . . . Many short-term problems arise because not enough attention is paid to long-term structural reforms. Other major economies race ahead in terms of competitiveness, research and labour skills. Jobs and growth in Europe are at stake. That is why the European Council devoted its March and June [2010] meetings to preparing ‘Europe 2020’, an ambitious ten-year strategy of jobs and growth.” The focal points of this programme are: fostering research and development and education (school and university levels), sustained energy economy and increased energy efficiency. With its new strategy the EU has set itself ambitious goals: by 2020, 75% of the 20- to 64-year-olds to have jobs; and the number of people affected or threatened by poverty and social marginalization to drop by at least 20 million.

The first two years of Van Rompuy’s tenure were marked by an upsurge of concentrated action without precedent: the decisions covering the establishment of a durable crisis-management mechanism, a competitiveness pact (“Euro-Plus”), reform of the stability and growth pact, budget and economic policy control, plus the passage of the fiscal and the ESM agreement, among other measures. And “with every month of the euro crisis, Van Rompuy

gained the increased respect of the heads of government – and ultimately influence as well” (Zeit online, 2 March 2012). Three months before the end of his term of office, the Council President was unanimously re-elected on 1 March 2012 for another two and a half years (up to 30 November 2014); at the same time it was stipulated that the Belgian would also chair the Euro-summits.

No longer underestimated by anyone, he plans to continue in future to stick to his line, working “primarily focused on results,” he has announced. “He has regular meetings in Brussels with the ambassadors of the Member States, which in terms of protocol is actually beneath his dignity. In such rounds, he reportedly listens very closely to what the various EU countries have to say. ‘He’s an itinerant mediation committee,’ says one diplomat. His work on texts is praised as ‘masterly’, which in the EU with its document fixation is a cardinal virtue” (FAZ, 18 Oct. 2012). An absolutely central document of his tenure is his report entitled “Towards a Genuine Economic and Monetary Union”, which Van Rompuy wrote in close cooperation with José Manuel Barroso, Jean-Claude Juncker and Mario Draghi, later adding specific target dates. Thus the realization of a genuine economic and monetary union now has a regular place on the EU agenda as “work in progress”.

It is indeed Van Rompuy’s firm conviction that the current challenges make “a commitment to a timetable for the road to a genuine EMU and its subsequent implementation indispensable”.

Specifically he calls for an integrated framework of finance and budgetary and economic policy, and for ensuring the necessary democratic legitimization. These building blocks make it clear that “more Europe” is not an end in itself but rather a service on behalf of the citizens of Europe aimed at increasing their prosperity.

The continuity of the office of a standing Council President and Van Rompuy’s efficient spadework, his perseverance and his pragmatism have notably operated in the past four years to better equip the European Council to set the EU’s policy goals and to have Council decisions followed up by concrete action – also and above all when policy sectors coming under the responsibility of the nation states are involved. “The so-called Community method is and will be the central way of adopting European policy and legislation,” states the Belgian with unmistakable clarity. “Yet this method, in all its variations, can only apply in areas where the Union has the competence to act and cannot be applied in fields of national competence. However, European coordination is sometimes indispensable in those areas. The economic and financial crisis has shown this clearly.” And if a measure of European integration and coordination has meanwhile been achieved that a few years ago seemed unthinkable, that is due also to Van Rompuy’s circumspection and to the strength of his ability to act.

Van Rompuy represents the European Union externally, together with the Commission President – at regular bilateral summits with Japan, the USA, Russia, South Africa, Brazil and China; at the meetings of the G8 and G20 states; at the United Nations General Assembly; and at multilateral summits, including the “Eastern Partnership”. Recently when the signing of the association agreement with Ukraine fell through, it was the Council President who in unusually pointed words warned third states against interfering in EU-ties with East-European countries. “We will not bow to Russian pressure,” stressed Van Rompuy, at the same time reaffirming that the agreement with Ukraine was still “on the table” and encouraging the government in Kiev to move ahead on the road to Europe: “Now is the time of courage and decision.”

Van Rompuy calls upon us Europeans to address the conflicts in the neighbouring regions of the EU as an all-European task, and to contribute in a spirit of solidarity to their solution. Only in this way can Europe live up to its global responsibility.

In honouring in 2014 the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, the Board of Directors of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen pays tribute to a great European and an untiring worker, mediator and architect of consensus, who in troubled times has made a significant contribution to consolidating the EU, and who by generating important impetus and ideas provides orientation for the road to be taken by the Europe of tomorrow.