

# Tale ved åpningen av ECPP-konferansen i Oslo

**Stortingspresident Olemic Thommessens tale 11. september 2014.**

*Publisert med forbehold om endringer under fremførelsen.*

Your Excellency, Madame President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,  
Your Excellencies, Presidents of National Parliaments and Presidents of International Parliamentary  
Organisations,

Your Excellencies, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and Minister of EEA and EU Affairs  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with immense pleasure and honour that I welcome you to the Storting, to Oslo and to the  
European Conference of Presidents of Parliament. This Conference, held every two years, is an  
excellent occasion for dialogue and the exchange of opinions.

But it is more than that: it is also a unique arena in which all present share the common objective of  
strengthening the principles and values of the Council of Europe: respect for the human rights and  
fundamental freedoms of all people, democracy, and defence of the rule of law. Irrespective of race,  
colour, religion or gender.

We share the same visions for a prosperous, dynamic and democratic European continent, but we also  
face many common concerns. For although we have witnessed significant progress since the fall of the  
Berlin Wall – periods of great economic development, democratization and more open societies –  
there are dark clouds on the horizon.

Millions of our citizens are unemployed and struggling to make ends meet. The position of human  
rights in parts of our continent does not meet the standards we have committed ourselves to uphold.  
Armed conflicts are tormenting civilians and creating tensions between countries that ought to be  
close partners. And we are even witnessing serious violations of international law, in that a European  
state has forcibly annexed part of a neighbouring country.

I take it for granted that you will not forgo the opportunity to discuss these problems here in Oslo.

Dear colleagues,

this year Norway is commemorating the bicentenary of its constitution. This constitution, one of the  
world's oldest still to be in use, was adopted on the 17th of May 1814. But this year we are not just  
celebrating an important historic text. What we are celebrating is 200 years of democratic  
development. I would like to share some thoughts with you in that respect. What have we learned,  
and which challenges are we facing?

History has taught us that a successful democracy must adapt to its environment. An important  
responsibility for us as parliamentarians is therefore to promote debate on the challenges to  
democracy in our time. Besides, and this is important: our democracy must function in such a way  
that active participation in it is a natural state of affairs.

In fact, one of our biggest challenges is to include and engage all citizens so that they take an active part in our democracy, now and in the future. It is crucial to prevent a situation occurring in which the increasing diversity of our societies causes groups of individuals to build alternative communities, be it self-determined or as a result of exclusion from mainstream society.

It is therefore of utmost importance that we reach out to all groups in our multicultural societies to make sure that they are valued and included in the wider community.

A well-functioning democracy requires us to engender full participation in our democratic processes; at work, at school and in the wide variety of voluntary activities that we take part in. It requires that people have a sense of belonging and equality, and that they have confidence in the institutions of democracy, which must be easily accessible and provide equal opportunities for all.

Our digital age is changing the framework of our democracies. New ways of communication are tearing down existing barriers and creating new opportunities for political activity in all parts of our population. It is fundamentally a good thing that more citizens are getting the opportunity, a platform, to voice their opinions on societal matters.

However, the digital age also brings with it a fresh challenge. The comprehensive and open dialogue that bears relevance to our society at large is in the process of being fragmented and replaced by innumerable small conversations in closed rooms and behind closed doors. In this myriad of new arenas and communities we can obtain new information and nuances that we did not have access to before.

Of course, this can be enriching and of great value. But there is also the risk that people only pay attention to arenas that communicate one-dimensional messages confirming their own preconceptions, and where the authors of these messages have agendas that are not conducive to openness, tolerance, and the genuine exchange of opinion.

In this way digital arenas may turn into arenas of hate speech, which is a serious problem in today's Europe. We have seen all too many examples of how hate speech makes people blind, and how the hate it creates may lead to violence, to hate crimes.

Hate speech is really the opposite of open and constructive dialogue. Parliaments, and Presidents of Parliament, must therefore be at the forefront in the fight against it. I am therefore a strong supporter of the initiative to establish an European Day for the Victims of Hate Crimes.

The problems I have mentioned demand that we take a fresh approach to the conditions for democratic participation. A successful democracy in today's world must embrace diversity, but it must also have common arenas for broad and well-founded public debate. In my view, parliaments have a particular responsibility to foster such debate – and to initiate discussion on exactly which common values we want to build our future societies on.

If we, the peoples' elected representatives, succeed in this, the legitimacy of our parliaments – the citizens' trust in our democratic institutions – will grow.

Dear colleagues, the three themes of this conference; fundamental constitutional rights and freedoms; democracy, sovereignty and security in Europe; and majority and opposition, should provide ample opportunity to debate the challenges to modern democracy. It is therefore with great anticipation that I look forward to the sessions on our agenda.

In conclusion, let me again welcome you to this conference and to Oslo. It is my sincere hope that you will have two interesting days here, and I would like to wish you a pleasant stay in our country. Thank you.

Let me express my great gratitude to the three speakers. The opening session has now come to a close.