

Speech by Emily O'Reilly at the European Economic and Social Committee Mid-Term Inauguration Ceremony

Speech

Honourable EESC President,

It is a great honour to be invited to speak at your inauguration and to be in the company of so many EU public servants who care deeply about the EESC's mission to bring civil society closer to the heart of EU decision-making.

The EESC is such a cornerstone of the EU edifice that it is easy to forget the bold vision that underpinned its foundation in 1957 - a process of European integration that was inclusive not just of political and economic elites but of all categories of European society. Contrary to some of the creation myths that surround the EU, it was understood from the very start that without some official channels to give voice to those who would feel the impact of European policy making, the project would fail.

Of course, how we understand the categories of social and economic activity have changed enormously since the days when computers weighed more than 500kg.

The authors of the treaty lived at a time when “producers, farmers, carriers, workers, dealers and craftsmen” were deemed the backbone of society, all with their professional associations and representative bodies. Today, how should we understand the role and representation of gig-workers, migrants in the grey economy, women (and it is largely women) doing unpaid care work, not to mention the army of YouTubers, Tik-tok influencers, podcasters and other digital entrepreneurs?

These and other questions are something I know the EESC and other EU institutions regularly struggle with.

The complexity and volatility of our economic and social life is here to stay, despite the best efforts of reactionary populism. We need to shape and adapt our institutions accordingly. I am delighted to see the EESC advocating for new forms of participatory democracy and the kind of democratic innovation - such as citizens' assemblies and participatory citizens panels - that we need to embrace if the desire for a more dynamic, representative and unmediated democracy is to be met. How to marry thoughtful and inclusive policy making with the impatient activism that



is the hallmark of much contemporary public debate is the central challenge to all of us who lead European institutions. It is why my office this year has put a renewed focus on the public's right to take part in the democratic life of the European Union, for which transparent decision-making and timely access to information is essential.

I am heartened by the commitment to shared values of trust, transparency, accountability and inclusion in President Röpke's speech and manifesto. The President rightly emphasises the need to reach out to civil society from accession countries and support them in the integration process, particularly when many of them are under pressure from less-than-democratic forces in their home countries. We must not lose sight of the fact that the magnetic attraction of EU membership is not just about our prosperity and rising standards of living, but the health and dynamism of our democratic institutions and so I wish you well in your new role.