



The Presidency Conference on
Future European Union Co-operation in the Field of Asylum, Migration and Frontiers
31 August - 3 September 2004, Amsterdam

**Opening speech by Mr. Rob Visser
Director General for International Affairs and Immigration
Ministry of Justice, The Netherlands**

Distinguished guests, dear participants,

First of all, let me welcome you to the Presidency Conference on Future EU Cooperation in the Field of Asylum, Migration and Frontiers, in Amsterdam, the capital city of the Netherlands.

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to welcome so many people here. You could have opted to go to the World Congress Human Movements and Immigration in Barcelona, where the climate is so much better than here. But, apart from a few of you who have somehow managed to attend both events, you have chosen to come here. I hope that means you attach as much value to this conference as we do.

Why is this conference important to us?

To start with, it was in this very city that the heads of state and government of the European Union concluded the long and arduous negotiations on the Treaty of Amsterdam on 18 June 1997, at 3:30 in the morning. This happened in the head office of the Dutch Central Bank, not far from here. I do not have to explain to you the importance of this treaty, which really made it possible for the European Union to develop an asylum, migration and frontiers policy as a part of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice the Union wants to be.

Of course, there had been developments in this field before 1997, leading up to the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, but the development of a common asylum and migration policy really gained speed when the Treaty of Amsterdam entered into force on 1 May 1999. The Treaty contained a time limit, primarily in the field of asylum policy, of five years. So it was very timely that the European Council, held in Tampere on 15 and 16 October 1999, agreed on a political program to establish the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice.

The Tampere program was reviewed by the European Council after the 5-year period ended on 1 May 2004. On 17 and 18 June 2004, the European Council concluded that a new Multi-Annual Program on Justice and Home Affairs issues had to be established before the end of the year.

The Dutch Presidency has set itself the task to prepare this program with a view to its adoption by the European Council on 5 November. Most of the preparatory work will be done by the Justice and Home Affairs Council, which started in July and will spend almost its entire informal meeting, about four weeks from now, discussing the Multi-Annual Program.

But we think it would be a mistake if the ministers responsible for immigration were not informed by as wide a range of opinions as possible. Therefore we have organised this Conference on Future EU Cooperation in the Field of Asylum, Migration and Frontiers.

We want to know how you, as the experts in the field, think about the directions the policies of the Union should take, about the aims that should be set, and about the ways to reach those goals during the years to come.

We highly value an exchange of views among all of you, whether representatives of Member States, Candidate Countries or third countries, international or non-governmental organisations, or academics. We do not strive for a consensus; we do not want to reach formal conclusions in the next three days. What we want and greatly value is a debate during which you will feel free to speak what is on your mind, to point out the way you want us to go.

This conference is co-sponsored by Germany and Sweden, with the support of the European Commission and its ARGO Fund, which we highly appreciate. The conference has been organised in close cooperation with the Migration Policy Institute, whose great experience gives me complete confidence that this conference will be a success.

I have to end this speech with a sad note.

As many of you have already heard, last week we lost two eminent personalities in the field of migration policy and migration studies. Both of them were to have played a role in this conference.

Sir Adrian Fortescue had already followed a long and distinguished career when he was appointed the first Director General of Justice and Home Affairs in the European Commission in 1999. Justice and home affairs issues had long been dear to his heart, and Commissioner Vitorino rightly called him “a founding father of the area of Freedom, Security and Justice”. In 1989, when working in the Secretariat General of the Commission, he was appointed to start the process of thinking about a Europe without frontiers, and later came to head a Justice and Home Affairs Task Force. He built his department from scratch and oversaw its rise to the highly professional Directorate General that it now is. Last year he retired early and took a fellowship at Harvard University. He had accepted a role at this conference as chair of tomorrow’s workshop on European Frontiers and Security. Almost two weeks ago, Sir Adrian Fortescue died in London at age 63.

At 25 August we were informed of the loss of Mr. Jonas Widgren, Director General of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development in Vienna. For about a quarter of a century, Jonas Widgren played a very central role in the international debate on migration. He was Secretary of State responsible for immigration in Sweden from 1982 to 1987. Later on, he held a senior position in the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees and was the first co-ordinator of the Secretariat of the Inter-Governmental Consultations. In 1993 he was appointed Director of ICMPD. He remained at its helm until his unexpected death in Croatia, at age 60, and in which position many of us have come to know and highly regard him.

I therefore ask you to stand up and join me in one minute of silence as a tribute to these two men of great talent, intellect, strength and wisdom, whose untimely death is a loss to us all.

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