



# PRESIDENCE DE LA REPUBLIQUE

SPEECH

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AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE FOUNDING CONGRESS OF THE WORLD ORGANISATION OF UNITED CITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

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Mr President of the Republic of Portugal, dear friend, Mr Prime Minister, Mr Pierre Mauroy Ministers, Presidents, Mr Mayor of Paris, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Mayor of Paris for his kind words and his clearly successful and auspicious initiative. It is my pleasure to wish you in turn a very warm welcome to France and Paris. Paris, this city so close to my heart, a city always set upon being vibrant, welcoming, proud of its history and its heritage, forward-looking, and an integral part of the international fellowship.

I am extremely pleased, on my arrival, to see so many distinguished and friendly faces among you, the elected representatives of towns and countries that I have had the pleasure of visiting.

The members of the AIMF (International Association of French-speaking Mayors), to whom I address my warmest consideration, are well aware of the particular importance I attach to decentralised co-operation. It is the means by which international solidarity builds ever-closer links between citizens across all continents. We will further strengthen these links at the Sommet de la Francophonie in Ouagadougou this autumn.

In addition to this, by merging the United Towns Organisation, the International Union of Local Authorities and Metropolis to create the world organisation of United Cities and Local Governments, you have lent new weight to their action. Together, you will be able to steer the intercity and interregional cultural dialogue and co-operation that our world so greatly needs. Together, you will have a greater say in the multilateral forums in which you play an integral part. Together, you will be better equipped to take on those challenges faced by elected representatives the world over.

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The town is one of the cradles of civilisation. It is the birthplace of democracy, the place where dreams and cultures blossom. But also where violence and injustice wreak the cruellest havoc. This is why philosophers, architects,



town planners and statesmen have naturally endeavoured to establish rules for the ideal city.

Each town is the fruit of a culture and a history. Each one lives and changes with its personality, its mood, its limits and its size. Each is a blueprint for society etched on the land, having received from its founders, be they mythical or real, ancient or recent, the sacred task of bringing happiness and prosperity to its destined inhabitants.

Each era sees the town in its own way, fired by its promise, exasperated by the flaws inherited from the past. To the people of the last century, the Charter of Athens was like a manifesto for modernity. And we who are now seeing the limits of the industrial era and who wish to embark on an era of sustainable development, we who are confronted with the population boom and the urban boom, we sense the urgent need for a radical reform. Technological fervour will have to make way for a concern for human beings, with the creation of a more harmonious and rational relationship with the environment.

In the space of one century, the town has turned from a rare and sparsely populated entity into humanity's favourite habitat. Nearly half of the world's men, women and children live in towns. And the trend is growing, taking in most of the world's demographic growth. Increasing numbers of major cities are appearing, some extremely wealthy and others desperately poor, but all now with larger populations than most of the world's states. It would be futile to try to stop this phenomenon. Yet it is up to us whether it turns out to be positive or negative for civilisation. The face of tomorrow's world is fashioned primarily by today's towns; a fact that is clear to local governments, whose mandate places them at the crossroads of so many issues.

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Firstly, political issues.

Democracy is born in the towns and it is in local government that it flourishes closest to the citizens, who set great store by this proximity with their elected representatives. Yet in modern cities, the personal link between local government and its voters is becoming strained. The future of democracy hinges on rebuilding this link, introducing new, more systematic and effective methods of citizen participation, decentralising to ensure that decisions are taken with those who will have to live with their consequences, and choosing between the needs and desires of the present and the concern for the future.

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Issues associated with the basic principles of living in society and respecting others.

First and foremost and quite rightly, our fellow citizens expect the representatives they elect to effectively protect them against crime and keep



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law and order. This means imposing the uncompromising force of law on everyone, in the proper time and place. This is a priority. But also with the constant aim of integration, cohesion and respect for the fundamental right to equal opportunities. You are therefore quite right to have placed high on the list of your work the response of local government to the Millennium Development Goals, the international community's unanimous commitment to eradicating hunger, poverty, illiteracy and the major pandemics.

There is another aspect of your responsibility that I see as being of the utmost importance. The melting pot of peoples and communities that is so characteristic of modern cities is sometimes seen as a threat to identities and cultures. If we establish rules for modern living in our towns, whereby nationalities, religions and cultures live side by side in harmony and mutual respect, our world will respond better to the challenge of borders opening and the coexistence of civilisations.

For France, as a land of liberty whose culture has been nourished by ongoing exchanges that we have called for with the rest of the world for the last two millennia, this ideal becomes reality with the Republican pact whereby everyone has a place that respects their origins, beliefs, traditions and aspirations. Those who have come from elsewhere to settle in France are to be welcomed and assisted. Yet no one may take advantage of a community allegiance to impose their law on the law. Everyone must accept the other's liberty and the common rules. Such is the substance of secularism, a rational principle of liberty, public neutrality, tolerance and peaceful coexistence made necessary in our society by centuries of clashes between nations, parties and religions.

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### Economic and social issues.

The world-economy is organised into highly complex and increasingly flexible networks. Businesses set up and relocate as opportunities arise. It is up to each town and region to attract, alongside the national policies, businesses as promising and laboratories as dynamic as possible. Every element of global competition – infrastructures, housing, taxation, cultural life, links with the rest of the world and quality of the environment – must be brought into play to win over and hold onto talents, which guarantee well-being and international influence.

Assertive proactive social policies are also needed to prevent and overcome the effects of restructuring and to form local solidarities all the more necessary for social cohesion in that this competition is virtually unbridled.

The South is now experiencing the rural exodus experienced by the North for one and a half centuries. This has brought populations forced by need and gradually stripped of their cultural identity flooding into the towns. It has created cities brimming with wealth and vitality alongside poverty-stricken areas, shantytowns into which are crammed nearly one billion men, women and children.



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In the face of this urban explosion, the South needs help and co-operation. The North also suffers from this coexistence of rich and poor areas, this mechanism of exclusion that spawns injustice and humiliation. We cannot resign ourselves to this.

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Last but not least, town planning issues, which determine the quality of life and access to basic services.

We need to design modern town planning that corrects the terrible failings of town planning in the 20th century. Draw on all the resources generated by progress without sacrificing a sometimes-irreplaceable heritage. Guarantee everyone, despite demographic pressure, the space they need to live comfortably without inconveniencing their neighbour. Find the right balance for the height and concentration of housing and the spread and density of the urban fabric. Design a transport network that facilitates trade without congesting the cities. Give people and business their place and organise their relations with the surrounding environment. Meet the specific needs of children, seniors, the disabled and the most vulnerable. Make it easier for the underprivileged to access decent housing, but also education and health care. Create enough parks for city dwellers to have room to breathe. These are all choices that bring with them their own dilemmas.

We also look to you, and the State, to construct and maintain public water, sanitation, electricity, transport and communication networks. There are many solutions available to find the resources required to set these networks up and run them in the best conditions. In this regard, the Johannesburg Summit highlighted the potential of partnerships between the public sector and the private sector.

Each city's choice should rest on its own free appraisal, provided it satisfies the requirements of justice, continuity and equality of access to public services. France has proposed that the guiding principles for access to basic services be laid down in a text to be adopted by the United Nations, in the spirit of Rio and the Istanbul Summit.

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We need to address these and many other debates bearing in mind that what you come up with will go some way to determining the pertinence of our response to one of the major crises of our time: the ecological crisis.

Modern towns are protagonists of this crisis. As huge emitters of pollution and waste and enormous consumers of space, energy and natural resources, they make a massive ecological mark on the planet, which compels their inhabitants to concern themselves with the consequences of this. Local consequences in the



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form of pollution and sometimes-serious illnesses created by our lifestyles. And global consequences in terms of the effect on the balance of nature.

To help the State and public authorities take full account of the ecological aspect, I have called for France to have an Environmental Charter incorporated into our Constitution. The right to a quality environment will hence be protected in the same way as the rights of man and the citizen stated in the declaration of 1789 and the economic and social rights laid down in the Preamble to the 1946 Constitution.

The Charter was drafted following a major national public debate and has been submitted to Parliament. It states the place of Man in his natural environment, without which he would not be able to survive, and the detrimental consequences of excessive pressure on natural resources.

It declares everyone's right to live in a balanced environment that is not harmful to their health. It calls on everyone, and first and foremost the State, to adopt an attitude of responsibility based on education, information, prevention, precaution and compensation for the sake of future generations. This text raises great hopes. I am aware of the questions that such a move could raise and I understand them, but I believe that the adoption of this Charter will represent a huge step forward for France.

It is a text for liberty, responsibility and confidence. A text that will motivate scientific research and technological innovation to make economic growth synonymous with sustainable development. A text for civilisation that places mankind at the heart of the ecological issue. A benchmark text that will inspire France's national, European and international policies for decades to come.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

If there is one urgent task facing all political leaders, it is to find responses to a world troubled by globalisation and by the crisis of meaning burdening our contemporaries. These responses concern as much the towns and regions as the States.

France's responses are based on an attitude rooted in its history: the fierce will, no matter what, to command its own destiny, to always refuse to succumb to the pressure of the argument of necessity, and to embrace the forces of the times and use them to our advantage to improve our culture, future and solidarity. The will also to avert the risk of chaos by establishing basic requirements for an international life ethic.

The requirement of responsibility. National and regional responses to issues such as containing financial storms, fighting organised crime and terrorism, combating AIDS and the major pandemics, and solving the ecological crisis are



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no longer enough on their own. We have to accept our interdependences, gauge the consequences of our actions and organise our reaction together.

The requirement of democracy, to give this collective response the same legitimacy as our national policies. This implies taking action within the framework of the international institutions, and first and foremost the UN. It implies stepping up the participation of the Southern countries and giving MPs, local government representatives and associations more of a say. It also implies adding to the structure by finally creating the United Nations Organisation for the Environment and setting up a social and economic security council. France is working on this along with other countries.

The requirement of solidarity. At a time when we are seeing the interpenetration of economies, nations' destinies are merging and a planetary consciousness is gradually appearing. This is why France is stepping up its official development assistance and working tirelessly on mobilising the new wealth generated by the globalisation of trade.

The requirement of dialogue between cultures. If nations are to address globalisation dispassionately and accept the universal values of the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, they have to be assured that their identity will be respected and their uniqueness recognised. The dialogue of cultures is one of the most effective antidotes to the supposedly inevitable clash of civilisations.

Such is, in brief, the project towards which you are working. A project for mankind, in which you play an integral role, better still, an elevated role as conferred upon you by your responsibilities as local government representatives.

I wish your federation long life and success. Be assured you have France's full and enthusiastic support. I propose that we establish ongoing co-operation between us in all the multilateral forums. In this way, we can each help to establish a peaceful and just planetary democracy based on solidarity, our political response to globalisation.

Thank you. |