

Speech for the European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all: Thank You very much for inviting me to this beautiful place - doing me the favour of escaping - at least for a moment - Brussels - or even better - the cold North and Denmark, where every minute of my time these days is dedicated to my election campaign.

European elections in all Member States - diverse as they might be - surely have ONE thing in common:

The voters only realize that one election is underway a couple of weeks before the event itself.

Nevertheless, no candidate will run the risk of a late start - so all of us have been campaigning for months already. Someone would call this exercise "striptease in the dark". One thing is for sure: It's tiring!

So right now - six weeks before Doomsday - we all wish that Election Day was tomorrow..!

Education, learning... is not - I am sorry to say - a part of anyone's election campaign. As a matter of fact: It has never been.

For obvious reasons, maybe: Education is not an EU-competence. And in most peoples understanding it should not be.

The good question is off course: How will EU get out of the Crisis, live up to the ambitious goals, set in the 2020 Strategy, if education is not far more integrated..?

On this background I think it is very timely to have a discussion on the future of learning, as you state in your Manifesto. Indeed, the economic crisis gives us all the more reason to take a renewed look at our ambitions for learning in Europe.

With the new Erasmus+ reform we have taken at very important step. But - before going into that - let me first say.... A few words about myself:

I am a former journalist, editor and news-anchor with 25 years working-experience in the Danish media world, both with national newspapers and Television. In 2005 I left the Danish Broadcasting Company - the channel 1 - to start my own consulting-company, working with communication.

Since 2008 I have been involved i politics - and was elected to the European Parliament in 2009.

I am a liberal and part of the liberal group, ALDE, which consists of 85 very diverse personalities. I can confirm that the term "liberal" is not a protected title..!

I work in two Committees:

The Internal Market Committee, which we call "The Engine" or "The Motor" in the European Union. Anyone with the ambition of learning just how advanced this political project is - just HAVE to spend a term in that Committee..!! We are involved in - what seems to be - every detail in the fine-tuning of the Internal Market. My learning-curve has been sky-rocketing....

My other working-field is the Committee for Culture and Education. And I guess that is why I am a here today - in that capacity...

Now - why does Culture and Education happen to be placed in the same Committee..?

Well, to get back to the point, which I have already mentioned once: These areas are not EU-competences..!

Consequently, my work in this Committee is fundamentally different from my work in the Internal Market Committee. This Committee is loaded with legislation. Almost no legislation passes the CULT-Committee... Erasmus+ is the exception.

I mention this now - and I will get back to this point in a moment...

Another personal note on the subject of private schools - or "independent" schools, as you have chosen to call them (interesting distinction, by the way)...

I never went to/attended a private school..!

I am a product of the Danish school system in 1970's: My father was a doctor and he put me and my brothers in a public school, which was - to say the least - not very ambitious.

On top of that, it was political decided back then, that it made no sense to teach for instance History, so this subject became voluntary, an add-on, so to speak. With the very foreseeable result, that a whole generation of youngsters never learned anything about history. I personally believe, that this part of the educational reform was inspired by The Chinese Culture Revolution...

When one of my friends - quite unusually - changed to a private school, I asked my father if I could do the same..?

Well - my father's answer was clear: None of my sons will ever need to mingle with stupid rich kids..!

Now - my father was absolutely no fan of chairman Mao...but: The mood was like that in Denmark in the 70's.

40 years later many things have changed - for the better. Today, private schools in general are seen as a valuable supplement to public schools. Three of my own children went to public schools - a fourth child went to a private.

BUT - from time to time - one still have to listen to a debate, where the "old ghosts" appear. As late as a couple of years ago, the Danish prime minister - A social democrat, by the way - ran into a Tsunami of Anger - when the press exposed - and this was breaking news!! - that she had followed her daughters wish - and allowed her to change from a public to a private school...!

You just can't be a good social democrat - and do a thing like that..!!

Why do I mention this..?

Because - it seems to me, that this discussion - at least in some countries - is still a blocking stone. And this might - and I underline "might" - influence the European approach to private schools...

Now - turning to the European level: I have good news - and bad news.

The bad one first:

For a fan of the private schools like me - it is a somewhat depressing fact, that my Committee - to my memory - not once in five years have had solid and serious debate about the role of Private schools in the Lifelong Learning Strategy.

The good news is that I am sure this debate will come within the next five years.

How could this debate emerge..?

I could give one example: As a liberal I am a strong believer in public-private partnerships. Within education it offers the much needed bridge to businesses.

This bridge has a Brussels-name: The so called University Business Dialogue is crucial if we are to fight the problem of youth unemployment in Europe. Private schools could also tap into this potential - and look at - giving pupils a taste of the working life.

Another obvious example is diversity. Private schools give an important contribution to society in terms of offering an alternative to public schools.

For me it is a question of giving parents a choice. Independent schools have a crucial role to play in diversifying the landscape of education in Europe. Not only an alternative in the strict sense, as for example schools with a religious, philosophical or pedagogical focus - but also an alternative on quality.

I for one will be happy to remind my colleagues, that it is important to offer a diverse range of choice in schools. I believe that diversity will help to raise the quality of the education - and private schools are important in this regard.

Therefore it seems to me that, there is a task of communicating and spreading this message. Looking at the material that ECNAIS prepared for this conference it is clear that you are already doing a tremendous job in doing exactly that.

However, I must be honest with you: As I just said: The subject of private schools is not something that has been high on the agenda in Brussels. Some would even say that you are not on the agenda at all.

But that would maybe be taking it too far. Indeed, the success of receiving grants from the Jean Monnet programme in 2011 proves that you have already managed to break the silence and get recognition from the EU system.

I can say from my personal experience that once the first step has been taken it is much easier to take the second step. My modest estimate is that this is a signal: There is room for private schools in the current programme.

But you can still do much more to enter the political arena in Brussels and become a part of the agenda. In politics it is a matter of being present.

Therefore I hope to see you in Brussels in the future. The Parliament would surely be a good place to have a conference, and I am sure my colleagues would welcome the input from you and other stakeholders from the school sector.

A good way to enter the discussion in Brussels would be to play into hot topics such as literacy and early school leaving. Fighting early school leaving is already an effort that is well under way.

The goal of reducing the average share of early school leavers to less than 10% by 2020 has already been met by eleven Member States.

Statistics from 2011 show that, close to four fifths (79.5 %) of the EU-27's population aged 20 to 24 had completed at least an upper secondary level of education. So there is a clear movement underway. I have no doubt that the private schools are doing their part of the job, to keep things moving in the right direction.

With literacy and skills in the sciences, the picture is a little bleaker. Quite bleak in fact. Approximately 20% of the young generation is not equipped with the necessary basic skills in literacy, mathematics, science and technology.

PISA results from 2012 show that 22.1% of European students were low achievers in maths, 17.8% in reading, and 16.6% in science.

This does not promise well, and our competitors around the world are way ahead. The results in 2012 showed, that Shanghai-China and Singapore were leading in maths, with students in Shanghai scoring the equivalent of nearly three years of schooling above most OECD countries.

Hong Kong-China, Taipei, Korea, Macao, Japan, Liechtenstein, Switzerland and the Netherlands were also in the group of top-performing countries. Just one EU country in this group is not impressive.

So it is clear that we have a huge task. I have no doubt that private schools perform well on these issues. Please keep it up, we need it.

The EU-goal is clear. By 2020 less than 15% of 15-year-olds should be classed as 'low-achieving' in those basic skills, as measured by PISA tests.

Now turning to the Erasmus+ programme:

Just recently We took a hugely important step in adopting a new programme for education and training (youth and sport) for the next seven years. With a budget of €14.7 billion; a 40% increase compared to current spending levels, the EU shows, that education is not an area where we should cut.

Instead we are giving education a massive boost with this impressive reform. This is the kind of signal we need to send to Europeans. That education is not to be sacrificed. Not even in a time of austerity.

I had the pleasure of being the chief negotiator on behalf of the liberal group. We reached the goal of spreading out education to as many as possible. I am proud to have a share in the result.

As negotiator I focused - among other things - on keeping the sub-brands in the programme. This was a tough fight and we won in the end. Keeping all the sub-brands meant keeping diversity. This included keeping an ambitious level for the Jean Monnet programme, both in terms on support to the institutions and the programme itself.

Why is this important? It is important to offer a solution that will appeal to as many students, teachers, adult and pupils as possible. There is no one size fits all. And I am pleased to see, that the private schools managed to get the Jean Monnet grant in 2011 with the project "improvement of diversity in education".

This is a great illustration of how private schools can make the link to an EU programme. And as mentioned above I think this may very well be the first step of the private school sector becoming more linked to the EU project...!

Europe needs diversity - Europe needs your help!

Thank you for your attention!