

FAREWELL RECEPTION COMMISSIONER VASSILIOU
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Speech by Androulla Vassiliou
European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth

Dear friends,

I am very happy that you could join me here this evening. I see many faces that mean a lot to me, and many friends who have made the journey with me during these years in Brussels.

They say that life begins at 40. Well, I decided to retire after 40 years of working life – back in 2006. And, true enough, a new life did begin.

I started working on a book about women in Cyprus. I wanted to look at social changes between the generations. Drawing from my own personal experience, I wanted to explore how prejudice affected women in the world of work. And so I started to write.

But then, all of a sudden, in 2008, life had other ideas.

Following the elections in Cyprus that year, I received an unexpected phone call from our President. He asked me to make a trip to Brussels.

"What for?" I asked.

"To be our next Commissioner" he said.

"How long do I have to think about it?" I asked.

"One hour" he said.

I had never thought of myself as a Commissioner. It was true that I had served on the EU Committee in our national parliament. I had worked on the EU – Cyprus Joint Parliamentary Committee. I had taken part in the Convention on the Future of Europe. And of course I had a privileged view of my country's accession negotiations. So there I was in front of a dilemma.

With my family's encouragement, I took that flight to Brussels, and I prepared to meet a man that I knew, from a distance: José Manuel Barroso.

At the airport, here in Brussels, I was met by a man who was to support my work for many years to come: Philippe Brunet.

I want to express my thanks and gratitude to Philippe and to Despina Spanou for all they did for me in those first weeks. First and foremost, they helped me to prepare for my hearing. We all witnessed another season of hearings last month, and it hasn't become any less nerve-wracking for everyone involved.

Even today, almost seven years later, when I think about that big pink book that DG SANCO prepared for me, I start to get a bit nervous. So much jargon. So many acronyms. It was all Dutch to me!

But for both of my hearings, DG SANCO and later DG EAC as well as my two cabinets all helped me to see more clearly. No one could get through such an ordeal alone.

I will never forget my second hearing, with the Culture and Education Committee, because this produced my first encounter with its Chairwoman – and legend – Doris Pack. I thank Doris very warmly for being here.

We all know Doris and the formidable character she is. But let me say that my respect and admiration for her never ceased to grow over the next five years. We did not always agree. We had our moments. But you will rarely see a more committed European, and I think we achieved a great deal together.

But that hearing really was something. As I reached the dramatic climax of my opening remarks, I heard a very loud noise behind my back.

Doris was interrupting me in mid flow. Doris was telling me to stop. I had reached my 15 minutes. Not a second more. Not a second less.

It was a taste of things to come!

So let me thank all the people who led my cabinets and helped us to achieve success. Philippe, Despina, Themis Christophidou, Yiannos Asimakis and Jonathan Hill.

Together with all the members of my cabinets, you have been a family to me – my family in Brussels – and I am deeply grateful for all your work.

I want to say just a few words about what I wanted to achieve. Not the policies and the programmes but the relations between people.

Above all, I wanted to develop strong relations within our cabinet. This is the core of the team, from beginning to end.

I wanted to have strong collegial relations with our Directorates-general and to see good relations between our cabinet and their colleagues in the services.

I wanted to meet regularly with staff at important moments during the year – not only here in Brussels but in Luxembourg too. I wanted people to feel that I was fighting their corner.

I wanted to develop a constructive relationship with the European Parliament leaders and the committee chairs, above all the Environment and Culture Committees.

And I wanted to build a close relationship with our stakeholders. From health practitioners to experts on animal welfare, from school teachers to opera singers. I was fortunate enough to meet some very good friends in these worlds, and I am touched that many of you are here this evening.

I always say that working at the European Commission is more than a university. As the years went by, I came increasingly to value our ethos of lifelong learning.

Being a Commissioner for education and youth during the most painful crisis only strengthened my belief in the power of education.

We have no duty more urgent than to raise the quality of our schools and universities in all Member States so that our young people acquire the skills they need for a complex and competitive globalising world; so they can find their path to happiness, fulfilment and a place in society.

Turning to culture, our President, José Manuel Barroso, often said that this was the 'glue' that united all Europeans, whatever their origin. And I often repeat that culture is not a luxury or a pastime. It is a necessity.

As Commissioner I tried to spread the belief that culture is vital not only for its own intrinsic value and for giving us a sense of identity but also as a new source of economic growth and employment.

It was a pleasure and a privilege to work with so many interesting and committed Europeans across the entire spectrum of the arts, from music to literature to festivals to heritage and cinema.

I want to take this opportunity to thank and congratulate all of them – the artists, the creators and the thinkers – for contributing to the New Narrative for Europe and for keeping alive the vision of the European Union's founding fathers.

I also take this opportunity to thank my good friend Sylvia Costa, EP Rapporteur for Creative Europe, for our great cooperation and to say how happy I feel that she has taken over the chairmanship of the Cult Committee. I am sure that she will very ably drive their work forward.

Working with youth groups made me feel younger. And it strengthened my belief that we must empower our young people as much as we can because the future of Europe belongs to them. And I must confess that it breaks my heart to witness so much youth unemployment in many Member States, and which persists in spite of Europe's many initiatives.

The power of language learning is more evident today than ever before. It is a gateway that enables us to study abroad, to work with people from other cultures and to enjoy our travels in a whole new way. I am very happy that together with our Member States we gave new impetus to our European 1 + 2 target: mother tongue plus two foreign languages.

The Commission's translation and interpretation services continue to deliver outstanding work. They are the lifeblood of our entire organism, enabling cooperation between our Member States and allowing citizens to interact with all of the institutions.

Sport was the baby in the family. But it grew very quickly, and I am proud of our work. I hope that our first recommendation on health-enhancing physical activity will help to combat obesity and the harmful effects of a sedentary lifestyle.

I look forward to the first European Week of Sport which will unfold across Europe in September next year. Let me say how important it was to work with the major federations, such as the International Olympic Committee, UEFA and others. We also worked closely with the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, and here I want to pay a special tribute to MEP Santiago Fisas for his personal commitment to sport.

We have here with us the Belgian Minister of Sports, Philippe Muyters with whom I worked very closely as he has been the oldest serving Minister in the Sport Council. Thank you Philippe for being here.

Finally, I want to say a few words about what I learned during my first mandate, as Commissioner for Health, working with SANCO.

I think it's fair to say that we faced a crisis or two. And they arrived from all quarters. The swine flu epidemic, the pork crisis in Ireland, the oil from Ukraine, the milk from China. For a while, it didn't stop, and of course we will always face one crisis or another. Now we have Ebola.

Professionally this was a testing but rewarding experience, and I came to understand how important it is to remain calm, to take action decisively and to coordinate the response. Crisis management is a central part of policy-making.

I also learned the complexities of dealing with competing interests. Biotechnology companies, environmental groups, supporters and opponents of GMOs, Big Pharma and patient groups...They all compete for attention and influence, and the politician must remain both sensitive and independent.

I think you understand what I meant when I said that life in the Commission was more than a university.

And so, I am deeply grateful to the Cypriot President and to President Barroso for entrusting me with the post, and to the European Parliament for confirming me; to all the members of my two cabinets who supported me; to the Directors-General who guided me: Jan Truszczyński and Xavier Prats Monne, Marco Benedetti and Rytis Martikonis; and to all the officials who worked with me over many years.

It was my honour to work with all of you. You do great things for the European idea, and I hope I have made my own modest contribution.

I want to thank my personal friends and they know who they are, for being there for me during my lonely weekends in Brussels and last but not least, I want to thank my husband, George, and my children who encouraged me to take up the job and who have been a great support for me throughout these years.

Let me finish by making a wish: that the crisis that has overshadowed my mandate comes to an end, and that the new Commission can work in more favourable conditions. I wish all of them, but especially my successor in DG EAC as well as the new Commissioner from Cyprus, every success.

Thank you all for being here this evening.