

MR. RICHARD'S SPEECH AT THE
CONFERENCE ON THE PREPARATION OF HANDICAPPED
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FOR ACTIVE ADULT LIFE
NOORDWIJKERHOUT, 19 - 23 OCTOBER 1981

Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen;

It is a very great pleasure for me to be among you on this occasion, and to be able to address you at the start of your valuable activity here. While wishing every success to your work, I should like to take the opportunity of saying something of the achievements of the Community in favour of the disabled, and of the direction which its future initiatives are likely to take. But I wish first of all simply to express my whole-hearted support for the work of this Conference, and my conviction of its importance. I have three good reasons for this.

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Firstly, this is a Conference about young handicapped people. 1981 is the International Year of Disabled People, an event which the Commission and the European Parliament have welcomed and to which they are determined to make a worthy contribution. This Conference obviously fits firmly into that context.

Secondly, your discussions are centred on the problem of preparation for adult and working life - a theme to which I attach particular importance - not least because my portfolio in the Commission includes the responsibility for education as well as for social affairs and employment. I am, therefore especially aware of the need to link education and training provisions for disabled youngsters to a wider strategy for their vocational and social integration.

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And my third reason is that I attach a special value to the style of cooperation that has been a 'leitmotiv' in the planning of this Conference. This is the first time, as far as I know, that the Commission has undertaken an event of this kind in close collaboration from the outset with leading associations representing the interests of disabled people, their families and the teaching profession. I believe this is an exciting development and a good precedent for the future.

Let me now say something about what the Community has been doing in recent years in favour of disabled. Most important of all, at least if amount of expenditure is the criterion, has been the interventions of the Social Fund.

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In 1980 no less than 70 million units of account were granted from the Fund to training or retraining activities of the handicapped. In 1981, moreover, this figure has exceeded 90 million. Last year alone, over 100 000 disabled persons directly benefitted from these programmes. Though all applications for Social Fund support must come through governmental channels, many of them are initiated by private bodies. What is more, the Social Fund is not only concerned with supporting training programmes which are organised on traditional lines, important as many of these are. As was shown at the seminar which took place in Mulhouse earlier this month (another element in our International Year programme, by the way), Social Fund support has made a vital contribution to innovations of worldwide significance - in devising new strategies for disabled people to enter the open environment for example, in updating methods for the training of trainers and in the creation of modular training systems.

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These 'mainline' interventions of the Social Fund have been complemented by other activities within the Social Action Programme which, while not involving such heavy expenditure on the part of the Community, have done much to promote and disseminate good practice in overcoming the problems of disability. In this context, I should like to mention the Community's Network of Rehabilitation Centres, which has been in the vanguard of innovation and European interaction over the whole field of training, guidance and placement for every category of disablement. Let me take a concrete example: a new centre for the rehabilitation of severely handicapped people will soon be open in Ireland. Thanks to the contacts established by the Community's Network of Centres, the training staff for that Centre will themselves be trained at the Rehabilitation Foundation in Heidelberg in W. Germany. This is an example of what European integration should mean in practice. ./.

A second example of Community activity has been the programme of pilot projects concerning housing and mobility of disabled people. Here again the Commission has been concerned with promoting innovations, particularly at local level, in the planning, design and adaptation of the living environment in order to offer to the disabled not only the practical possibility of integration into open employment but also an escape from social isolation in their private lives and leisure time. There is thus a close parallel with the main preoccupations of this Conference - the need to offer to disabled children, a form of education and training which also brings about a genuine social integration with their peer group.

The Community activities, which I have mentioned, involving the Social Fund, the Rehabilitation Network and the Housing Pilot Projects are relatively well established. But what about education? Our activity here is certainly more recent, and we have had to work rather gradually, bearing in mind that we do not have a strong base for Community educational activity in the Treaty. The reference to equality of opportunity in the Resolution of the Council and Ministers of Education of February 1976 has, however, enabled us to lay a foundation of work on the educational needs of disabled children and young people. We started in 1977 by inviting Mr. Skov Jørgensen, Head of the special education department in the Danish Ministry of Education, to prepare a survey of developments and trends in the education of handicapped children throughout the Community.

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The Jørgensen report formed the basis of a Conference on special education which the Commission organised in cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Education in Rome in December 1978. This report has since been published, together with the principal conference papers, in six languages in the Commission's Education Studies series.

The Commission carried this work further, in cooperation with a liaison group of national experts, nominated by the Nine Ministries of Education. In 1979, a consultation paper was prepared which set out the key issues in the field of special education and suggested a series of corresponding supporting actions at Community level. These ideas were further refined in the light of the comments received from a number of European and international bodies representing the interests of disabled people and their families and teachers' organisations.

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This brings me to the International Year itself. We have in the educational as well as the social field organised a number of specific actions in honour of the year itself in addition to the present conference. We have arranged with Mr. Jørgensen for the completion of a second series of studies - an updating of the developments in the Nine; new studies of the situation in Greece, Spain and Portugal; an analysis - which was presented to the 12th session of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education in Lisbon this year - of the importance of pre-school education for disabled children and their families. In the near future we shall be providing a report on the contribution that can be made to the education of the handicapped by the new technologies.

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We have also set in train this year an entirely new set of pilot projects to explore the value for young disabled people of learning experience in other countries. We are arranging these projects in cooperation with specialist organisations such as Mobility International and the European Federation for Intercultural Learning. A synthesis report of the whole group of projects will be made by the Youth Forum, which has taken a deep interest in promoting exchanges between disabled young people. In one project, of particular interest to this Conference, disabled young people from various Community countries will be brought together for a number of days to a school in Germany where the disabled and 'able-bodied' young people are educated together. Towards the end of their stay they will discuss the question of segregation and integration as they themselves see it - the first time I believe that in an organised way at European level we shall have the opportunity of hearing the voice of the young handicapped themselves on this question.

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However, the Community contribution to the International Year should clearly not consist merely of actions limited to the 1981 calendar year, however useful and necessary these may be. I am determined that the principal contribution of the Commission should be to make progress at the political level - by launching concrete actions, the effects of which should last for several years at least after the International Year is officially over. There must be no question of forgetting about the disabled, or relegating them to a lower position on our list of priorities, on the first of January 1982. It is my intention that the Commission will present for consideration by the Council and Ministers of Social Affairs (which will take place in December this year) a new set of measures to promote at Community level the social integration of disabled people. These measures would extend over a five-year period, starting - after a preparatory stage next year -

Social integration is an important, all-embracing objective, to which all governments of the European Community are already committed, as clearly expressed in the conclusions of the Council on this subject as recently as June last year. Through social integration, disabled people may begin to exercise their right - which is the right of us all - to participate in and contribute to all aspects of economic, social and political life, and to move with the greatest possible freedom in the learning, working and living environment.

Social integration means that progress must be made simultaneously over a whole range of policy areas - health and welfare, employment, education and training, housing and transport, application of new technologies, information and public awareness, to mention what I believe are the most important.

It also implies a proper coordination of the different services to which disabled people look for the removal of handicaps and barriers; coordination, that is, both at the planning stage and at the point of delivery. This requires, first and foremost, a specific commitment to social integration at the level of local communities, which after all already have administrative responsibilities in this field. It is also through action at local level that wider cooperation can be developed between statutory bodies, voluntary organisations, social partners, local media and the public at large.

These ideas of coordination, cooperation and participation will I am sure be very present during your discussions at this Conference. We can expect them to reoccur in each of the eight working groups.

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These themes are after all especially evident in all new strategies to deal with the problems of the transition from education to adult working life, which have been highlighted and exacerbated by the current period of economic recession. In recent years, as all Member States have tried to come to grips with the problem of youth unemployment, the different administrations in each country have been faced with a most important challenge to their capacity to think through new policies in inter-departmental terms, involving education, training and manpower authorities at the very least. Similarly in all Member States there has been both a new willingness and an objective need to mobilise the resources and cooperation of local communities in setting up new programmes for unemployed school leavers.

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These trends have been promoted, monitored and evaluated by the Community over the past few years, particularly within the context of the Community action programme on the preparation of young people for working life, launched by the Ministers of Education of the Nine in 1976. This programme, which many of you here will be familiar with, has as its main axis an interaction network of pilot projects throughout the Community. The programme is now entering its final phase, when all the emphasis is being placed on the evaluation and dissemination of information about the projects in the context of policy development at local, national and Community level. This action programme has covered a multitude of themes relating to the problems of transition. Disabled and disadvantaged youngsters have been the subject of several projects and I am glad that the latest "Newsletter" produced for and by the projects, has been dedicated to this aspect of the whole programme.

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I could talk at length about the excitement and the experience that we have gained during this first Community action programme concerning young people. It is from this programme in fact that we shall be drawing many of our ideas for future action, not only in policy terms (for instance the emphasis on cooperation and participation at local community level), but also in terms of methods of action. Our plan is to set up a network of locally-based development actions which will act as demonstration models for the whole Community on how to tackle social integration for all disabled people in a given district, in respect of all the policy areas involved - and to do this without the injection of vastly privileged resources which would make it in practice impossible to transfer any successful outcomes elsewhere.

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I am thinking then of a network of somewhere between 15 and 20 districts, each with a population of perhaps about a quarter of a million people: some might be urban, some rural, but none exceptionally well-favoured or ill-favoured socio-economically, not any I think specially forward or backward as far as social integration of the disabled is concerned. In each participating district a local advisory committee would be set up to represent the disabled themselves and their families, official and professional interests, the voluntary organisations and the social partners. With their agreement a coordinating and animating team would be appointed, responsible for stimulating innovation to promote social integration throughout the district - for instance by creating new contacts and forums for discussion, advice and planning;

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by initiating new programmes of public information and debate; by establishing new forms of training and cooperation between officials, professionals and voluntary workers. I hope that the Community will contribute to the cost of each coordinating team and also to the evaluation of the experience in each district. Most important of course will be the interaction between the districts to ensure that the Community dimension can effectively enable districts to learn from each other across frontiers.

This network of districts innovations will be the 'core' activity of the new set of measures I shall put forward. I shall also be proposing to carry out a series of specific studies and conferences on particular problems in the area of social integration, designed to assist the Commission in drawing up policy guidelines during the five-year period of the programme.

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I shall also be suggesting new arrangements to improve the flow of information about social integration and innovatory measures. Building on the experience of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training in Berlin, and of the Community's Information Network on Education (EURYDICE) the Commission will explore the feasibility of setting up - particularly for use by policy makers - a European data base on the problems of disabled people. I am also planning specific support for a network designed for the needs of local authorities focusing initially on certain planning issues identified within the district actions. Finally, I want to increase the support we give to the information activities at Community level of voluntary organisations and associations which represent disabled people or their families, and which aim to promote the participation of disabled people in decision-making at all levels.

Within the same general framework, and equally related to the theme of social integration, we will of course continue the pilot projects on housing and the network of rehabilitation centres. These will be able to contribute to and benefit from involvement with the new district projects. Within this overall strategy the Commission will certainly be looking for the advice and help of the voluntary associations organised at European level. Equally, we shall need the support and cooperation of national officials in a wide range of different ministries. In this context, I should also like to say a few words about the importance which I attribute to cooperation with other bodies. To mention the OECD first, and in particular the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, we attach great value not only to the outstandingly high quality of the work which has been already achieved in their programme on the Handicapped

Adolescent, but also for the generous cooperation which they have extended to the Commission ever since we were first engaged in exploring the educational aspects of the social integration of the disabled. This cooperation continues, as even now we are working with experts to improve our design of the district development actions, and it will, I am confident, continue to expand in the future.

Let me express also my appreciation to all the organisations of families, of teachers and of the disabled who have sent delegates to this conference, and especially to those who are more formally associated and have participated from the very first in the planning of it; also of course to the European Centre for Work and Society for undertaking, as one of its first ventures, the complex task of organising this even on the Commission's behalf.

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22 Finally, I would like to congratulate the United Nations on its initiative in devoting this year to Disabled People. (I am aware of the very heavy pressures which have fallen on the Secretariat of the Year in the course of the worldwide programme of events: I am all the more appreciative of the fact that the Secretariat of the International Year has gone out of its way to be represented here today.)

This is essentially an educational conference. In its future plans, as I have outlined them, the Commission intends to think of educational initiatives as an integral element in a broader, more comprehensive social strategy. The story of Carlo, which you will find in the special issue of the "Newsletter" (distributed here today) demonstrates that the most difficult problems can be solved and can only be solved if people work together and if parents are involved not only at the level of information but as partners with the professionals in

making vital decisions. This, I am convinced, is the high road to the future. I look forward to the conclusions of this Conference which I am sure will help us make progress in this direction.