

INAUGURAL SPEECH OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE ASSEMBLY OF THE REPUBLIC,

EDUARDO FERRO RODRIGUES

"I will be the President of all the Honourable Members"

São Bento Palace, 23 October 2015

Honourable Members of the Assembly of the Republic,

I would like to begin by welcoming the outgoing President, Ms Assunção Esteves, who, with her humanism and competence, understood how to dignify Parliament and the office of President of the Assembly of the Republic at a complex time and in a very demanding legislature.

I would also like to welcome all the elected Members and wish them every success in carrying out their mandates, now that the 13th legislature is getting under way.

I welcome all the officials of the Assembly of the Republic and greet the journalists who work here.

The start of a legislature is a time of renewed hope. And it is always a very special moment for those who are coming here for the first time with the noblest of missions: representing the Portuguese in the Assembly of the Republic.

I well remember the day I took up the office of Member for the first time.

I recall some Members that singled me out at various times and functions: Raúl Rego, Jaime Gama, Manuel Alegre, Barbosa de Melo, Mota Amaral, Almeida Santos, Silva Lopes, João Cravinho, Basílio Horta, Pacheco Pereira, Lobo Xavier and many others who, unfairly, I am not naming.

I want to tell you that the honour I felt on the first day I sat on these benches as an MP is exactly what I feel today in deserving the trust of your vote to hold the office of President of the Assembly of the Republic.

I hope to live up to the legacy that has been left to me by the Presidents who have preceded me and to their example of democratic culture and institutional cooperation.

I will be the President of all the Honourable Members.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Assembly of the Republic is a sovereign body that has an irreplaceable place in our democratic political system.

It is in this House that the sovereign will, expressed by the vote of all Portuguese women and men, is represented in the composition of the groups of the various political parties.

This is where legislative initiatives are passed and laws are made. The Assembly of the Republic is the forum par excellence for the monitoring of government action. But this is also the centre of major political debates. And that is why it is a crucial place for expressing differences, and also for constructing commitments and balances, always essential to sustaining the great advances in our country.

A quality democracy does not end on election day. Democracy is a system of separation of powers, a system based on rules and procedures, in which the opposition has a status and as a relevant role as the Government.

The Assembly of the Republic is required equally scrupulous respect for the role of the

other sovereign bodies, the President of the Republic, government and courts as well as for the autonomous regions and local governments. This is a binding constitutional duty.

We respect the sovereignty and autonomy of the courts, the government and the President of the Republic. Hence, we have the right and duty to require respect for the sovereignty of Parliament.

This legislature should serve to consolidate the legislative and supervisory role of the Portuguese Parliament and uphold it as the stage for major national political debates.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today in particular, the Assembly of the Republic is required to understand how to properly fulfil its constitutional duties, but also know how to go beyond its traditional methods.

Parliament is required to understand how to be equal to the times that we live in and the signs that the Portuguese are giving us.

The Portuguese feel distant from power and have less and less trust in democratic institutions. The levels of dissatisfaction with democracy are worrying.

In the elections of 4 October, more than 40% of the Portuguese opted to not even bother to vote. Forty years after the first free and fair elections, which mobilised the hope of so many in Portugal, we achieved a strong abstention in elections, even taking into account the lack of realism of the electoral roll, which have to take into account the huge emigration between 2011 and 2013.

We must not deceive ourselves: many of these signs of dissatisfaction with democratic institutions are first and foremost down to dissatisfaction with the country's current economic and social situation.

The process of economic adjustment that we are going through has left social wounds that must be healed as a matter of urgency. I'm thinking about poverty. Unemployment. Inequality. And unwanted emigration.

No economy grows in a fair and shared way if it leaves most of the people behind. No democracy is strengthened when its middle class is shrinking. The world's most prosperous and competitive societies are cohesive and caring societies with high levels of qualification and innovation.

We have to restore the values of solidarity and innovation to democratic institutions. These have been and will continue to be the battles in my life!

Ladies and gentlemen,

In addition to economic and social improvements, the Portuguese are waiting for changes in the political system; changes that bring them more power of scrutiny and participation; as well as changes in the culture prevailing among the political players.

Lively debate and the full expression of differences is compatible with a culture of respect and dialogue. In these past, very difficult, few years it would have been important at certain times to have known how to protect such distinction and find room for negotiation and compromise.

Having good politics is half way to having good policies and good results.

We urgently need to consolidate a new grassroots democracy. We need to find ways of ensuring that citizens have more influence on the choice of each of their MPs, always

with scrupulous respect for proportionality. We need more transparency in the exercise of public office. We need to bring the State and its services closer to citizens.

Parliament should be the forum for these great political debates.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Next year will mark the 40th anniversary of the adoption of the Portuguese Constitution.

This date deserves a special celebration.

Celebrating the Constitution is not a mere ritual. It signifies remembering the topicality of the constitutional spirit of 1976.

In 1976 it was possible for parties and constituents that represented very different social models to converge with respect to the rules of the democratic game and the fundamental values that still guide the Portuguese Republic today.

The European integration of Portugal is certainly the basis of many successes of 40 years of democracy. But it was the initial constitutional spirit, marked by compromise and convergence, which then offered the political conditions for the advances of democracy to be achieved.

Conflict is characteristic of democratic politics, but no democracy can survive without a culture of institutional loyalty and of strategic dialogue between the parties represented in Parliament. No democracy can survive without compromise.

The truth is that the history of the successes of these 40 years of democracy is the history of many political compromises and many advances in civilisation, which were only

possible because there were those who sat at the table to reach an agreement on fundamental issues.

Adapting Mário de Carvalho, I would say that the Honourable Members are all going to have to exchange a lot of ideas on many subjects.

Or, to quote Pessoa in *The Book of Disquiet*: “All of us in this world are living on board a ship that is sailing from one unknown port to another, and we should treat each other with a traveller’s cordiality”.

And so our history of compromise and convergence must necessarily be repeated in this new time in which no political force gained an absolute majority.

In this context, the responsibility of all the parliamentary groups is increased. The Portuguese will be watching the Assembly of the Republic.

In a world with too many wars, incredibly serious problems of refugees and migrants, at risk of disasters caused by climate change, this Parliament and this country are summoned.

Everyone has been summoned. Everyone. Because in a democratic parliament nobody – I emphasise: nobody - representing the people is, at the outset, prevented from contributing to the future.

Just as there are no first and second MPs, so there are no first and second parliamentary groups, some coalitions that are acceptable and others banned.

Throughout these 40 years, we have shown that we know you cannot have a republic without republicans and that you cannot have democracy without democrats.

Together, we have already fulfilled many dreams of democracy. We have achieved political rights, and we have also achieved the economic, social and cultural rights of the Portuguese.

We now have new dreams to fulfil. And this is why we have to learn to live up to these new dreams.

Allow me a personal observation - I have spent nearly 50 years in the daily political struggle for more democracy and social dignity, I owe a great deal to my grandparents (I learned to read with the newspaper *República* that my grandfather had a subscription to during the *Estado Novo*) and to all my family. Those who unfortunately have already left and those who remain always at my side, my wife, my brother, my children and grandchildren. And of course my friends (some of them for over 60 years) and my comrades.

I would like to end by wishing all the Honourable Members the greatest success for this 13th legislature.

Let us make this new legislature that starts today a new legislature of parliamentary dialogue, political compromise and social progress.

The measure of this success is that in four years' time we should have a democracy that is closer to our ambitions.

Thank you very much.

Eduardo Ferro Rodrigues

President of the Assembly of the Republic

São Bento Palace, 23 October 2015