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**Speech by Xavier BERTRAND**  
**Informal meeting of European ministers with responsibility for families**  
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Ministers,  
Colleagues,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

The Chantilly debates on the renewed social agenda have clearly shown that the ageing of the population is one of the most important challenges Europeans have to face together.

As you know, the future of our societies depends on the irreplaceable dynamism and wealth contributed by our young people.

This is why, when Nadine Morano, the Secretary of State for families, indicated to me that she wished to take advantage of the French Presidency of the European Union to organise an informal meeting of ministers responsible for families, I immediately gave her my support, as did the government as a whole. I would like to thank her today for the energy and dedication she has shown in the preparations for this meeting. Nadine Morano has invested all her passion as both a local politician and a mother in this work, and is committed to achieving progress.

I would also like to thank everyone present for having agreed to devote this time to discussing family policy in Europe.

1. I have several messages I would like to communicate to you this morning. The first is that Europeans must work together to take up the demographic challenge. The challenge is crucial, but we can face it more effectively if we discuss it together and set common objectives.

The average birth rate across the European Union is 1.52 children per mother. I need not point out that this level is not high enough to ensure population renewal.

The results differ from one member state to another. But we are not here to award good and bad points; that is not the issue. Ultimately, whatever the level of our birth rate, we are all in the same situation: if

we do not reverse this trend, our population will stagnate and then begin to fall. Another question then arises, that of relying on immigration, but this is a secondary issue. Above all, the issue is one of European demographic vitality.

Going further, how do European birth rates, even in the countries where they are highest, compare with demographic growth in the rest of the world? This will be the subject of the demographic forum organised by the Commission on 24 and 25 November, in which the French Presidency will take part.

So what can we do at European level?

Nothing, say the pessimists, since family policy is the sole preserve of the individual member states. Fortunately, we are not pessimists. I do not agree with this view.

First, because family policy is not a hermetic unit: it is interlinked with many other policy areas which do fall within the competence of the Community. I am thinking for example of policy in the area of health and safety at work, policy to fight sex discrimination, policy to combat poverty and social exclusion or policy on the organisation of working time.

In any case, does the European Union not take an interest in family policy?

What were we doing in 1992, then, when we adopted a directive on maternity leave?

What were we doing in 1996, when the social partners negotiated a framework agreement resulting in a directive on parental leave?

What were we doing in 2004, when we adopted a directive aimed at outlawing sex discrimination which explicitly authorised differing treatment in order to protect pregnancy and maternity?

To those who invoke the competence argument, I reply that the question is based on a false premise. And rather than false premises, we, like you, prefer real debates: how can we ensure that families throughout Europe can thrive? How can we best use the experience we have accumulated jointly to help women balance their families with their working lives?

To answer these questions, we need common objectives and a common thought-process.

For the common objectives, I think naturally of the Barcelona objectives, which Europeans set in 2002 to develop childcare provision. This is one of the themes Nadine Morano has invited you to debate today. The Barcelona objectives are ambitious: guaranteeing access to childcare services for 33% of children aged up to three and for 90% of children aged between three and mandatory school age by 2010. For the moment, the member states are still far from achieving them. The Commission has announced a review of progress, which it will present in the form of a communication at the beginning of October. On 7 July 2008, the European social partners wrote to Commissioner Spidla to underline the urgency of the situation and call on the member states to invest massively in creating new places.

Turning to the common thought-process, I would like to emphasise the excellent tool Europe has acquired by creating the European Alliance for Families. And here I must pay tribute to the actions of the Germany Presidency, which defended the establishment of the alliance throughout the first half of 2007.

The second message I would like to communicate this morning is that the French Presidency is ready to act on Council decisions in order to continue building a European framework that will help families thrive.

We are ready to move forward on reconciling family life and working life. In this area, as you know, the social partners announced on 13 March 2008 that they would open discussions with the aim of presenting shared proposals in the autumn. The field is very wide: it includes revising the directive on parental leave, but also setting up new leave arrangements such as paternity leave, adoption leave and filial leave. I would like the social partners to give us their proposals in all these areas quickly, so that we can give them concrete form as soon as possible, and at least by the next European Parliament elections.

We will then be ready to move forward on protection for pregnant women employees, self-employed workers and people caring for a spouse. We are awaiting proposals from the Commission on all these subjects, on which there is room for improvement in existing legislation.

We would like to make progress in the area of solidarity between the generations. This was debated in depth at Chantilly as part of the discussions on renewing the European social agenda.

Finally, I would like to look at another subject which I know is far from simple: social services of general interest. This label covers areas such as services to help parents with young children and childcare services. The French Presidency would like to move forward on this issue to guarantee greater legal security for providers of these services and to assure users of the quality of these services. I know that we are not all saying the same thing about this subject. But one thing is certain: we are all talking about the same thing. We need to start by looking at concrete cases where Community law is unsatisfactory. We must then take the initiative, with the Commission, of drawing up a roadmap that will set a number of intermediate objectives so that we can continue to move forward in the area of social services of general interest. This roadmap should meet the needs of operators in the sector and respect the broad principles expressed by the Commission with the publication of its "internal market package" in November 2007.

Ministers, ladies and gentlemen, your involvement and commitment are crucial if we are to make progress on the two subjects on the agenda of this meeting: developing childcare provision and protecting children on the Internet, with the aim of better coordinating our efforts in the fight against cybercrime.

European citizens expect us to give concrete answers to the problems they face in their daily lives. I am sure that we are all eager to meet this challenge.

Thank you.

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