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Open letter to Mr Barroso on anti-discrimination Directive

Dear Mr Barroso

Next year there will be European elections and a new Commission and Parliament

will be formed. It seems that it cannot come quickly enough for you. The ambition with which you started your work as Commission President has dampened. For years you have delayed the decision making on a general anti-discrimination Directive. And now at this late stage you come forward with a proposal that only fights discrimination on the basis of disability. For equal treatment regarding ethnic origin or sex we already have quite good legislation. But very subtly, you refuse to tackle discrimination of homosexuals, as well as on the ground of age or religion and belief.

Do you still remember your speech in the plenary session of October 2004?

We had just finished a serious confrontation with candidate Commissioner Buttiglione. A majority of the parliamentarians were not confident that this man, who thinks gays are sinful and would not use his right of initiative to strengthen European anti-discrimination legislation as we wanted. You tried to save the situation. You stood in front of us in Strasbourg with your hand on your heart, you promised solidly to be united with us in our demands.

You said you also wanted to get rid of the hierarchy of discrimination because why would discrimination on the basis of race, ethnic origin or sex be more widely banned than discrimination of homosexuals? You praised your team as the Commission for Equal Opportunities announcing that you would work to replace the current separate Directives by a general ban that would also cover the discrimination "founded inter alia on gender and sexual orientation".

The European Parliament accepted the promise, but sent Mr Buttiglione back to Italy. With a different cast, you then got our blessing. Maybe we were wrong to trust you, because you now refuse to live up to your promise. On more than ten occasions the European Parliament has pressed you to come forward with the Directive. But there was always a reason for delay. We needed 'impact assessments', 'legal advice', and now you come up with only a Directive to protect people who have a disability? No matter how important this is, you shamefully play off one group against others who face discrimination in their daily life.

A Commission spokesman said that we had to accept "political reality". Which reality? Your lack of courage? Maybe you expect that a general anti-discrimination Directive will be vetoed by unwilling member states? If so that is a hurdle that we have to jump over at a later stage. Without a proposal from the Commission, the national governments do not have to do anything and therefore you make life too easy for homophobic politicians in some capitals. If your predecessors had given up at the first sign of resistance, Europe would not have an internal market or be a front runner in environmental protection.

But we will not give up. We now urge you to do the right thing! Keep your promises and the promise on which your entire Commission was endorsed. It is not too late. Let us fight together for justice and equality. The other option is for us to fight you until we achieve it. We will fight in the European Parliament, through our national parties, through our national governments, strong in the knowledge that our citizens expect politicians to keep their promises. Mr Barroso, we will keep our promise. Will you?

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