Modernising and improving social protection in the European Union

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Adopting the report by Mrs Barbara WEILER (PSE, D) on social protection, the European Parliament called on the Commission and the Council to use the possibilities offered by the Amsterdam Treaty for a common European social policy. However, it regretted that unanimity was still required in this area. It urged the Commission to demonstrate the importance of quality social protection to European competitiveness and called on the Council and the Commission to reach a decision without delay on the challenges which EMU would pose to social benefit systems and employment in the Member States. It stressed that an active policy to promote employment was the only useful basis for preserving or strengthening social security. The European Parliament called on the Commission to present a report on developments in poverty and wealth in the European Union every two years. It also called on the Commission and the Employment and Labour Market Policy Committee to define a social convergence strategy linking the Union's employment policy to serious social protection. At the same time, Parliament was in favour of identifying "good practices" in this area and evaluating the reforms undertaken in the Member States. It expressed its concern over current economic, social and demographic challenges and proposed the introduction of flexible systems for the transition from work to retirement. It supported the efforts made by the Member States to make the tax and social security systems more conducive to job creation and welcomed the progress made at the informal ECOFIN Council in September 1997 towards the adoption of a code of conduct which sought to eliminate unfair fiscal competition between the Member States. It considered in particular that the tax burden should be shifted from labour to other areas, which it did not define. It reiterated the need for better coordination of supplementary pension schemes and tax and social security schemes for frontier workers. It also called for social protection schemes to be reexamined in terms of professional discrimination and unequal salaries and recommended that the Commission identify discrimination which had arisen as the result of the application of actuarial factors in calculating pensions. Voicing its concern about the situation of women, it called for an examination of the possibility of introducing an entitlement to minimum benefits irrespective of time worked and salary and for the "contribution-benefit" method to be abolished for the purposes of calculating pensions. It also called on the Commission to present without delay a legislative text on equal treatment for the self-employed and a directive on child care. It called on the Commission to investigate any discrepancies in the Member States between social security systems which applied to married couples and to couples living together and for clear rules on medical insurance in the Member States.