

Welcome to CLECAT's 50th anniversary Freight Forwarders Conference, 50 years is a long time in Brussels, and we are delighted that you are here with us to celebrate this historic passing of time. CLECAT is now the reference organisation representing logistics and Customs services in Brussels. It is not only our public affairs body, but it is also our technical reference in many areas connected with EU legislation. In line with our remit and tradition we celebrate our anniversary today with a conference focussing on two of the hottest policy topics reflecting on our industry: addressing transport externalities and the new pan European electronic Customs.

The current status of the European economic climate suggests a downturn in economic activity, but the figures that we see in our newspapers are not just figures, they represent the lives of half a billion people. Our industry is imperative to maintaining the standards of living that we have helped create and will expectantly extend. CLECAT spoke at the Parliament yesterday and our message was very much mindful of this larger perspective. We believe action is wanted, but we have some more time to embrace a comprehensive solution, which will address externalities without hampering efficiency.

This conference is a golden opportunity to prove to those who find it difficult to see the tangible realities of our business that our industry is dynamic and full of vitality. It is also the main vehicle of our prosperity and comfortable standard of living, both of which would be impossible without efficient logistics.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I am so pleased to have so many people here: this is the largest conference that CLECAT has hosted and it is only right that an occasion like this is catered for in such well equipped surroundings as at the WCO. We received a number of signs of appreciation for our work, the level of our speakers and panellists showing their commitment to the importance of the topic.

CLECAT's appearance at the Parliament yesterday was a great honour for us, and as you may well know that in past editions, as well as in this one, we had the pleasure to hear all the Commissioners that are connected with our work, the Directors General of the Commission, MEP's, ministers and a number of high rank personalities from all over Europe and beyond. This is a sign that logistics and Customs matter in our lives, that our silent and pervasive work is seen and appreciated. Our future challenge is to bring this message to the general public, who, rightfully concerned about the impact of transport, should however understand that transport is not only noise and emissions, it means goods, clothing, food and all the appliances we treasure so dearly in our homes. It also means jobs and salaries for millions.

The future of our industry needs an organisation such as CLECAT for our voice to be heard where it matters in an organised, constructive way; Mr Ruete wrote, in a congratulatory message for this conference, that we are sometimes critical, but always constructive. This is certainly true and if one takes the time to look back at our past statements one sees that they were indeed wise and predictive. We have some big issues coming up, two of the major issues are to be covered today at the conference. We are fortunate to have some of those at the forefront of these issues here with us today and I am sure you will use this unique time with them to 'pick their brains' and ask the questions you think are important.

I, and the Secretariat, have pushed for a high turnout at this Conference and I am glad that we have not been let down. However if we are to maintain this momentum and prove our worth as an important lynchpin in European business and industry we need to show commitment to our cause, and that means maximum representation at all our conferences in future. As important as 50 years are, vital issues in Freight Forwarding, logistics and Customs will not need less attention at our 51st or 52nd anniversary.

Finally I would like to thank our Gold sponsor Oskar Schunck as well as Crossrail and the Port of Antwerp, who also significantly contributed to making this occasion interesting and unique.

I hope we can come back at the end of the day with clearer ideas and sufficient information for all of us to take the necessary decisions. In the next few years we shall see the results of today's decisions and actions. We believe Clecat will push them in the right direction.