



Discourse of Mr. Grage, President of the ESO Council

Your Excellency the President of the Republic Don Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle and Mrs. Martita Larraecheade Frei, Minister Arellano, Minister Guerzoni, Ambassadors, Heads of Delegations and Council Colleagues, Prof. Rubbia, Director General, Members of Parliament, Authorities from Antofagasta and Taltal, Distinguished Guests,

I am very happy to welcome all of you at the site of the ESO Very Large Telescope Array, the Paranal Observatory. I can imagine that, as I, all of you are thoroughly impressed by the incredible transformation that has been accomplished here during the past years. Those of us who have been here before will remember that just a few years ago this was a desolate and distant spot in the great Atacama desert, a place of rare beauty far off the main roads. Now we see in front of us the contours of the world's foremost optical telescope, a project of enormous dimensions and of the greatest complexity. I can think of few other places on the surface of this planet where the purest primordial nature and the most advanced human technology are so intimately intertwined!

I congratulate all of you who have been involved in this great feat. I think on this occasion of the astronomers and the engineers, at ESO and at the participating research institutes, at the numerous industrial firms, in Europe, in Chile and elsewhere, all those legions of dedicated people who have worked hard to design and build the VLT, to install the new observatory at this site, in short, to make a dream come true. Without your persistence and, not least, without your ability to convince the governing bodies that you were right, the VLT would never have happened.

You can imagine how elated we, the representatives of these governments and the members of these committees, feel today. I am sure that I speak for many others when I reveal to you that once the green light was given to the VLT in 1987, there were always small questions in our minds. Yes, this is a wonderful project, yes, it will produce marvellous science, yes, it will stimulate research in Europe and in Chile. Yes, they are all clever and we know that they work hard, but will they manage at the end to keep this complex project, the largest and most expensive of its kind within schedule and, not least, within the budget?

We now know that you managed and that you did so exceedingly well. There are plenty of demonstrations of this. Just think of all of what was shown to us today during the visit to the various areas of this unique site. Think of the deep impression the first results from the VLT have left at all levels, all over the world. Remember the fantastic perspectives for great research projects that were discussed in Antofagasta during the past days.

We are now just a few weeks from the official opening of the Scientific Programmes of the first of the four giant telescopes for the astronomers. The scientists with whom I have talked and who obtained time during the first six-month period are now approaching a mild state of ecstasy – no wonder when you look at what has already been obtained with that instrument during the commissioning phase. Not being an astronomer, I may even find more pleasure in the beautiful photos that have appeared than in the detailed astronomical results you have arrived at. But I have been long enough with the members of this community to sense that something great is coming!

Looking back to the early days of ESO, this international organisation has certainly come a long way: From the signing of the original convention nearly four decades ago, via the agreement two years later between ESO and its host country, the Republic of Chile, to the inauguration in 1969 of the La Silla Observatory and to the decision in that historical Council meeting eleven years ago we have all worked forward towards the day when we could officially inaugurate this new observatory. And it goes without saying that ESO Director Generals who are here today have made great personal contributions to this success over the past three decades!

The VLT project would never have come to where we are now without the close and efficient collaboration, not only between the individual ESO Member States but, in particular, with the host country of this organisation, the Republic of Chile. The VLT programme has indeed developed into an international cosmos of some importance, a fine example to follow during the current efforts to bring European nations closer to each other, but also reaching far beyond the borders of that continent.

Mr. President, we are thankful for your personal support and the persistent efforts of your government and many other authorities in Chile to help us to accomplish the construction of the world's largest and best ground-based optical observatory. The skies above your beautiful country are among the clearest in the world, and soon Chilean scientists, together with their European colleagues, will reap the fruits of our joint labours. There is no doubt in my mind that also at this level, the pioneering role of the VLT will be noted all over the world. And I am particularly glad to learn that ESO will feature prominently in the pavilion of the Republic of Chile at next month's Hannover Fair in Germany, one of the most important in Europe and to which your country has been invited this year as the principal foreign nation.

We are witnessing today an act of solidarity among scientists and politicians, linking culture and business, nations and people. With the power of this new facility, we shall see the faintest and most remote objects in the infinite realms beyond current horizons in space and time. Guided by the astronomers of this world, we shall travel into new territories, physical and philosophical, at the limits of our imagination. We may not understand all what those navigators try to tell us and they may have to work hard to explain to us the significance of some of their discoveries. Still, we are all citizens of this Earth and as such we are all participants, each with our special role, in this large endeavour. There may still be a very long way to go before we uncover the deepest truths about the origin and destiny of the universe. But we will now take some substantial steps in that direction with this wonderful new facility at Paranal.

Let us all be proud of that.