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Is there a European culture?

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

My thanks to the organisers and my warmest greetings to all of you here today.

It is a privilege and a pleasure to come and speak here in this world-renowned institute.

It is always a pleasure to be back in London. London is more than a capital. It is a world city, a cosmopolis teeming with people from all over Europe and all over the world. And the audience in this lecture theatre reflects that diversity of backgrounds and origins.

So this is a good place, ladies and gentlemen, to ask the question before for us today: ***Is there a European culture?***"

As Commissioner responsible for culture amongst other things, I imagine you expect an answer from me on that.

I hope I won't disappoint you. My first instinct is to say: no, there is not ***just one*** European culture.

At first sight, there is a vast mass of disparate manifestations that are vaguely cultural and loosely European. A mixed bag of customs and popular traditions, great treasures of art and intellectual works. A vast repertoire of dance and music and song. A catalogue of grand palaces, historic sites and quaint villages. A multitude of ways of life and world views.

Can we really put that hotchpotch, that glorious diversity, all those brilliant artistic achievements, under the same hat and call it a European culture? Without any underlying principle or unifying concept?

I bet you can find as many definitions of European culture as there are people in this room.

Because culture is also to do with identity -- with how you think of yourself and your neighbours, those you feel at ease with and those you perhaps don't understand. And what you want to do together within a particular context.

From this point of view our European culture was and is substantially inspired by the ancient Greek philosophy and the Roman law of nations, by religious traditions and heritage, by the humanist inheritance of the Enlightenment.

So we have to ask in what meaningful way we can speak of a European culture.

One broadly accepted view is to do with cultural icons -- those great European artists and painters, writers and musicians who spring to mind. The further back in history the better because they're less controversial.

Mozart -- because this year is the 250th anniversary of his birth. Shakespeare -- because we're in England. Figures who've had an impact across Europe and are recognised around the world.

Those universal spirits and their works belong to us all -- when we raise our horizons above the narrow confines of our nation states.

We probably all agree on this sense of "European culture" that celebrates the legacy of our shared cultural past. The further removed from us in time, the more universally accepted.

But looking at European culture only in that sense disconnects it from today's world and makes it backward-looking.

There is also, of course, a more contemporary heritage that is closer to our day. Art nouveau, art deco and surrealism, for example. The Beatles because we all love the music of the sixties. Antonioni's "Blow-up" because we're here in London. And then there is that vast cultural repertoire that consists of the television programmes of recent decades. The cultural influence of the BBC is a case in point.

Of course, you contribute to Europe's culture regardless of where you or your parents were born -- like Polish-born Joseph Conrad or Karen Blixen. Or even those writers born further afield -- like Michael Ondaatje or Salman Rushdie or Kazuo Ishiguro. They may have been born in Sri Lanka or India or Japan but they are all foremost English literary figures.

There are the Europeans we recognise and those we might not. Andy Warhol used to say he came "from nowhere". I like to think of him as a sort of honorary cultural icon of Slovakia where his parents were born.

So I would say then, that there are cultural elements that we could broadly recognise as European, but that it is very difficult to define what they might have in common. Rather like an elephant in a way: it's easier to recognise one than to define it.

But - since we are in London – let us ask a different question for a moment: *Is British culture European?*

The answer, for me, is clearly yes. Just as Slovak culture is European.

But can British culture be European if the British don't **see** themselves as European?

According to a recent Eurobarometer poll, only one third of people in the UK feel **both** British **and** European, while two thirds think of themselves as being just British.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

A fascinating debate about Britishness has taken place in this country recently.

I would like to say a few words about it because it links beautifully with the question we are debating today.

In doing so, I will refer to the positions taken by Gordon Brown and David Cameron

One of the paradoxes about Britain -- exemplified by its capital -- is its openness to other cultures and influences whilst at the same time retaining a stubborn suspicion towards "Brussels".

It may therefore come as a surprise to some of you that one of the most frequent criticisms levelled at the Commission today is that it has become too "Anglo-Saxon", or too British! In terms of the working language, the political culture, liberal economic policy and so on.

But let's leave that aside for the moment.

If -- according to the Chancellor -- knowing what being British means is essential to determining Britain's relationships with Europe, America and the rest of the world, then knowing to what extent the British are also European is also important

But where I am surprised by the Britishness debate is the way this issue of being *European* seems absent.

In the current debate on Britishness, it needs saying that you can, for example, be Welsh **and** British **and** European too. Which is something Neil Kinnock said to me when I saw him this morning.

Being European -- like being British -- cannot be defined by ethnicity or religion.

Europe is all about multilayered loyalties -- the national and European overlying and interlocking with the local and the regional.

So it seems to me that Mr Brown is right to say the UK has always been "*a country of plural identities*": today, for example, you can be a Christian or a Muslim or a Hindu or an atheist **and** British. And the same is true at the European level.

This ties in with what political scientist, Professor David Held of this august institution, refers to as "cosmopolitan democracy": the possibility of identity and therefore governance being plural and fluid over time.

It is important to say that here in London after last year's terrorist attacks. I want to say how much I admire the way Londoners have remained true to the values we all share of tolerance and the rule of law. Particularly in the face of the fanaticism and intolerance that inspired those attacks.

Oswald Spengler believed that cultures were partitioned off from each other and cultural values are incommunicable. But I doubt anyone would go along with that. Even if there are fundamental differences, many would agree that one of Europe's great contributions to humanity has been in enshrining the democratic fora through which such differences are debated and mediated.

The real challenge of globalisation is to allow the cultures of today's world to interrelate and exchange ideas without descending into some "clash of civilisations" that would be disastrous for all.

Now, this brings me to the central point of my lecture, namely that the idea of values is central to any conception of culture.

André Malraux defined **culture** as "*l'incarnation d'un système de valeurs -- et plus modestement : un accord des sensibilités*" -- as embodying a system of values within which we feel at ease and allowing us to communicate with each other.

And he identified Europe's values as "*la volonté de conscience*" and "*la volonté de découverte*" -- awareness of one's own identity combined with a desire to discover, create, invent. Being open to what is new while remaining aware of where we come from.

Such a system of shared values allows a community to debate the issues facing it.

Backed up by the historical references that give it depth, it allows us to engage with each other on fundamental social and political issues.

Like Malraux, both Gordon Brown and David Cameron see culture as being based on a set of values.

I am convinced the values they identify are broadly the same as the ones I'd pick.

Indeed, Gordon Brown admits that the ideas he highlights are not unique to the British culture, even if they do lie at the heart of modern Britishness.

Just what are those values?

The Chancellor cites three: ***liberty***, ***fairness*** and ***responsibility***.

The conservative leader's definition is more concise: he sums them up as ***freedom under the rule of law***.

Freedom is something we are all in favour of. But what does it mean in concrete terms?

Unlike an elephant, freedom might be one of those things that is easier to define when you don't have it.

I grew up in a part of Europe where freedom was something we could only dream about -- freedom to travel, freedom to express dissenting political views, freedom to vote against the party in power.

The golden thread of liberty runs through the history of all of Europe.

"*Libertas*" is the motto of the city of Bologna chose in 1376 after it became a free municipality. And Bologna adopted the first law abolishing slavery in 1256 -- over five centuries before William Wilberforce was born. Moreover, Bologna University -- symbol of our pan-European higher education reform process -- was established in 1088!

Perhaps because I come from a small nation in Central Europe that was once part of the multi-national Austro-Hungarian empire, a nation that was more recently part of a duo of nations within Czechoslovakia, I am acutely aware of how the national histories of our nations are tailored to underpin and justify certain political structures. In other words, tailored to emphasise and give credence to a certain political notion of cultural identity.

That was all too clear in my nation's not-so-distant past when Europe was divided by the Iron Curtain.

That is why I am convinced our pupils need to learn not only more about history but should do so critically too, placing the development of their own cultural identity in a wider context. – That means, amongst other things, more European history – a history that cuts across the nation states and traces the overall development of politics and thought in our continent.

The history of Europe -- not that of the individual nations, however ancient and deep their roots may be, however natural and God-given their borders may seem.

Focusing on national history means our peoples are steeped in their particular brand of national identity, an identity which emphasises differences with its neighbours and overlooks what is commonly held. A narrow world-view that excludes and denies the positive influence of intercultural exchanges, the fertile impact of cross-cultural contact that nurtures artistic and intellectual life.

Europeans have always exchanged ideas across borders. I think of the academics, intellectuals and men and women of the Church who travelled around Europe in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. John the Scot in Ireland, France and England, Thomas Aquinas in Naples and Paris, Duns Scotus in Oxford, Paris and Cologne, Erasmus in Paris, Leuven, Brussels, England and Basel.

Today's Erasmus programme takes up and amplifies that tradition. I am very proud of its success in carrying forward a certain idea of European culture in the field of education.

Despite Europe's cultural diversity – and that is something to celebrate and enjoy, by the way - what is remarkable is the way our different nations' paths have converged on a way of life based on values we all share.

Freedom, fairness and responsibility form part of a common core of values all European Union nations hold dear. They are vital to our European way of life -- based on parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, freedom of opinion and of faith, a free press, and a broadly cohesive European social model.

Having lived through the Velvet Revolution, the independence of Slovakia and the transition to democracy and the market economy, I can vouch for the power of those values in fostering reforms.

Those values are not unique to the European Union. And European countries have not always been first to apply them.

The first country to give women the vote was New Zealand. In Czechoslovakia it was 1918, while women in Britain had to wait until 1928 to vote at the same age as men.

But those values are now accepted by all and they form part of our minimum criteria for membership. They lie at the heart of our political project.

Whatever the special emphasis different European nations may place on them, those values form the basis of European culture as they do of British culture. And for this reason, I believe one can say that British culture is European.

Yet the British often seem unsure about whether they are in Europe or not.

Seen from afar, from across the Atlantic, from Shanghai or Bombay, Europe exists and this country is definitely part of it. Not just geographically, but also its history and its culture.

Viewed from my perspective, Britain has played a key role in Europe's history. Down the centuries it has shouldered its responsibilities. It has shown leadership and foresight and Europe is the better for it.

I think it follows from everything I have said that it would be a tragedy -- for Europe and for Britain -- if this country were to retreat back to these islands and withdraw culturally and politically.

The British are curiously ambivalent about their place in Europe.

Yet the UK plays a leading role within the European Union. It pushed for the Single Market and helped turn Europe into the world's biggest market in terms of GDP.

The UK can do much more to strengthen the Union by throwing itself wholeheartedly into the debate on our political future.

It can help Europe by embracing the European political project and strengthening the Union internally and externally.

It can help to ensure Europe's voice is heard on the world's stage by pushing resolutely for a stronger common foreign and security policy.

This would help to foster our values in the wider world. It would help to forestall threats to our security -- from nuclear proliferation and terrorism to people-trafficking and drug-smuggling. Threats to the environment. To public and animal health. To our energy supplies.

Remember Churchill also used to say he was 50% American -- by his mother -- and 100% British. So it must be possible to be 100% British and a little bit European as well!

Ladies and Gentlemen

I do not see the task of the European Commissioner for Culture as trying to create some kind of artificial European identity. Nor do I see it as promoting some kind of "Euro-pudding" notion of a common culture. But I do see one of my tasks as promoting awareness of what we have in common: awareness of how our common values, despite all our wonderful and refreshing diversity, give us a basis for acting together.

Take the Unesco Convention on Cultural Diversity -- an excellent example of the capacity of the Member States to work together jointly with the Community to promote the diversity of cultural expressions at international level.

This is why the EU has a Culture Programme. To show that there is a European culture that is meaningful in today's world, drawing on our shared cultural and historical references, rooted in our values.

I have to say that awareness of such a European culture is still inchoate and weak. It needs to be nurtured and encouraged.

This event here today is just such an example. And I want to thank the European Institute here at the LSE again for their excellent work in promoting discussion on issues of European concern.

But we need much more discussion like this across Europe.

We need a European press and media that are less focused on narrow parish-pump politics and more on what is happening at EU level. I would be the first to admit that the Commission has to try still harder to get its message across -- and we are working on that -- but it would help enormously if we had a press that would be less frequently successful in misinterpreting the Commission's proposals and actions.

But that's enough complaining!

In closing, I would like to add one more thought. I have argued today that it is possible to talk about something called a European Culture and that, ultimately, it is based on shared values. Such as freedom, fairness, responsibility, solidarity and tolerance.

I would argue further that these values cannot – and should not - be geographically defined or limited or that they are uniquely European. Their manifestations are also fluid and evolving. To put it very simply, a European culture based on these common values cannot be exclusive and cannot define itself in opposition to “other” cultures.

For this reason, one of my first actions when I took office was to propose that there should be a European Year of Intercultural Dialogue: dialogue not just between Member States, but dialogue between all the communities that live on this varied continent, as well as with those around it. I am happy to say that my proposal was taken up by the Commission, and 2008 will, hopefully, be designated as the year by the EU Member States and the European Parliament.

Indeed, it is in that very quality of dialogue that I believe a European culture manifests itself most clearly.

Thank you for your attention.