

Extract from a speech by Hans-Gert Pöttering, President of the European Parliament, for address to students at the London School of Economics (LSE), on Wednesday 27 February at 17.00 hours

Dialogue of Cultures or Clash of Civilisations?

Thank you very much indeed, Professor Damian Chalmers, for that kind introduction. It is a great pleasure and an honour to be with you here at the London School of Economics this evening, at the end of a very impressive visit to your city.

I arrived in London just over 24 hours ago, and since then have had the chance to meet and talk with the Queen, the Prime Minister, several other Ministers, the leaders both of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, and Speakers of the two Houses of Parliaments, - as well as many other parliamentarians. I have met with the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and faith leaders too. I would like to say how very much I appreciate the really serious and intelligent conversations about the European Union which I have held yesterday and today. I look forward to continuing that process of conversation here in what I see you call a 'public lecture'.

I am reminded of the reply that Roy Jenkins is said to have given when he was asked to define the difference between a lecture and a

speech. 'A lecture', he said, 'is usually a little longer than a speech, but not necessarily more interesting'. So I have decided to give a *short speech*, not a *long lecture*, this evening - not least to keep it interesting and so that we have plenty of time for your comments from the floor.

British perspectives

As I met the Queen at Buckingham Palace this morning, I reflected on the fact that, during her reign, she has so far seen eleven British prime ministers and ten US Presidents. The continuity she has provided - and her vantage-point on world affairs - have been quite extraordinary. I don't think in Britain people always fully appreciate her remarkable contribution.

I was reminded also of her two long-lived female predecessors: Queen Elizabeth the First and Queen Victoria. Their reigns were characterised by exploration around the world in the first case, and by industrialisation in the second. Today we would call these things 'globalisation'. At so many points in its history, Britain has looked outward to the rest of the world, in a spirit of ambition and self-confidence. In the process, it has changed world history, often for the better.

Today - as my meetings with Gordon Brown and David Cameron confirmed - the United Kingdom looks outward to a global world. To a world in which Europe can lead by example, and, in modernising our economies and harnessing the talent of our young people, we can meet the challenges ahead.

I see that many of you in the audience today are from other European countries. Indeed, the LSE has become a truly international university. British higher education is an example of where Britain leads in Europe. So many of you will understand the depth of my feeling when I say that - with so many assets - I want and hope that this country will play a true leadership role in the European Union, politically as well as economically, at the very heart of Europe. We want and need you to make that commitment.

Intercultural Dialogue

My short speech this evening is devoted to something very important in today's global world: whether we have a *dialogue of cultures* or a *clash of civilisations* in the future, and what we do to promote the first and prevent the second.

2008 has been designated European Year of Inter-Cultural Dialogue. The European institutions took this decision in order to assert their strong and growing political commitment to make inter-cultural issues

a mainstream part of the European Union's domestic and foreign policy agenda. Last month, I joined the Presidents of the European Commission and European Council in launching the European Year in Ljubljana, soon after the start of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council. The timing of this initiative could not be more opportune. The current international security situation has spawned a host of points of contention between the Western and Muslim worlds in particular.

Of course, inter-cultural dialogue embraces *all* cultures - and none is homogeneous or monolithic. But the Islamic dimension is the most pressing. We have to face the fact that the relationship between Islamic and Western societies is going to be increasingly central to life in Europe, and to politics in the wider world, in the years to come. I believe that peaceful co-existence with and between the cultures and religions around the European Union - and indeed within the Union - is of vital importance to our future.

If we can come to appreciate and respect each other - and find a way to live and work together - this may help resolve some of the most difficult current international political problems - whether Israel-Palestine, Iraq, Iran, or the threat of terrorism, both at home and abroad. Our long-term aim should be to build an intellectual and cultural bridge across the Mediterranean to the Middle East and

beyond - a bridge whose foundations would consist of mutual understanding and, so far as possible, shared values.

The Islamic culture is both rich and diverse, just as is the European one. It is dangerous and simplistic to see our cultures as fundamentally opposed. The idea of a confrontation between Islam and Christianity is simply misleading. There need be no 'clash of civilisations'. Indeed there is probably just as big a division within Islam itself as there is between Christian values and Islamic values. The real dividing-line is between those who are committed to respect for the identity and personality of the human being, of whatever faith, and those who are not. Commentators who lump all Muslims into the same category - and equate them with radical fundamentalism - do a grave disservice to the nature of the Islamic community. They also make it more difficult for us to develop intelligent policies for handling this challenge.

Certainly we often witness a *clash of understandings*.

Misunderstanding is precisely what the media inflames. But it is equally something which dialogue and discussion can do a great deal to overcome. There is no inherent reason why our relations must end in confrontation - and indeed it is vital that they do not.

Let us be in no doubt. If we work within the mind-set of a clash of civilisations, then we could easily cause this pessimistic theory to

become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If instead we work towards what the United Nations has called the 'dialogue of civilisations', we can remain open to discovering, understanding and working with other cultures, ethnicities and religions.

The word 'dialogue' comes from ancient Greek. One of its senses is that of a conversation between two or more people, made up of statement and counter-statement. A slightly different sense arises from the derivation of the word from the Greek roots '*dia*' (meaning 'through') and '*logos*' ('word, sense or meaning'). This makes dialogue a 'flow of meaning', an exchange of ideas, a process of mutual communication between partners, based on mutual respect.

By holding a constant and regular dialogue of this kind, we can and we will get to know each other better, improve our mutual understanding, respect each other's diversity, and hopefully work together as strong and trust-worthy partners.

New style of Foreign Policy

This kind of thinking does not always come easily to either the practitioners or students of traditional foreign policy. Indeed, I believe that inter-cultural dialogue implies the development of a new kind of foreign policy. It cannot be conducted exclusively by executives - at ministerial and ambassadorial levels - often in great secrecy, and

without any strong parliamentary or public involvement. Instead, there will need to be greater *openness* in foreign relations for inter-cultural dialogue to blossom.

I believe that a body like the European Parliament can make a special contribution to this process. To give you a concrete example: tomorrow I will fly to Athens for a meeting of the bureau of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly. I am Vice-chairman of this body, created by the European Parliament to bring together MEPs and parliamentarians from the countries to Europe's south that border the Mediterranean. It is the only parliamentary assembly anywhere that includes both Israel and Palestine. On Monday, I was in Cairo, talking with parliamentarians about how they stay part of that dialogue, whilst accepting the right of the European Parliament to pass resolutions that may not always say exactly what they would like on sensitive issues like human rights.

I am trying to introduce a parliamentary component to the major summits which the EU holds with third countries or regional groupings of states. We started this last year with the EU-Africa Summit, through the Pan African Parliament. Not everybody wants this kind of thing to happen. But - in parallel to classic diplomacy - we need these new 'soft power' instruments, to foster a stronger sense of exchange and community in the international arena.

During 2008, we are inviting a series of major political and religious leaders from around the world to address the European Parliament plenary. Presidents Peres and Abbas will address us later this year. We brought the Grand Mufti of Syria to Strasbourg in January. We look forward to welcoming the Dalai Lama and Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, among others.

We are hosting weeks of Arab and African culture. We have launched a year-long inter-cultural film festival. In May, the EU will host what has now become an annual summit of European religious leaders in Brussels, co-sponsored by the three main EU institutions. Our conference will bring together leaders from the Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Sunni, Shi'ite and Jewish traditions.

I myself always try to include meetings on inter-cultural dialogue on each of my visits inside and outside the EU. Today I met with leaders of Muslim NGOs and with the head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor. On these trips, we try not to limit ourselves to meeting imams, chief rabbis and archbishops. We aim to bring together civil society groups of different backgrounds to discuss hard-edged, immediate issues, such as the integration of immigrants into their host societies.

Middle East

I am also trying to visit all the neighbouring countries of the European Union in the Mediterranean basin. I want to discuss things on the spot, in the most practical manner possible. Last year, I visited Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Algeria and Tunisia. The Middle East is the cradle of three great cultures and religions: the Christian, the Jewish and the Islamic. An open and sincere dialogue between them could be an important element of the solution to the tragedy of the region.

Nothing could be more moving for me than the playing of the Israeli and European anthems in the Knesset, when I addressed that parliament. My visit to Israel and Palestine left me in no doubt that a serious opportunity - and indeed a real responsibility - exists for the European Union institutions to contribute to peace and development in the Middle East. I also felt very strongly that there was a growing openness to the idea that Europe should play a bigger part in helping to find solutions. In this, we can draw on our own European experience of reconciliation after the second world war. We need to engage in some new thinking on the Middle East, and I want the European Parliament to play an important part in this.

If we assume that the discussion must always to be structured around the *nation state*, we will get nation-state solutions - and nation-state problems. We risk simply organising things around what *divides* the region, rather than potentially what might *unite* it. We need a two-

state solution, but we need more than that. New thinking must involve thinking beyond the nation-state.

The European Parliament can help promote a stronger parliamentary dimension to relations with - and within - the Middle East. It can offer new fora for discussion, reflection and research, involving so far as possible all stake-holders in the region. We are putting together a series of initiatives in the European Parliament focussed on the Middle East. Our new Middle East Working Group met for the first time last Wednesday, under my chairmanship. This morning, Tony Blair told me that he, Bernard Kouchner and the other members of the Palestine donors' conference group will come to the Parliament next month to discuss EU funding. Mr Blair will also address a special conference we will hold on the Middle East in the Parliament later this year.

The European experience is very relevant indeed to the Middle East. When in May 1950, Robert Schuman proposed to pool the coal and steel industries in Europe, under a new sovereign authority, the idea seemed revolutionary. It was. In effect, the means to make war were being taken out of the hands of individual governments, and being put under collective control.

The successful story of building economic inter-dependence and sharing sovereignty in Europe over the last six decades proves that

lateral thinking can work. If Europe had remained stuck in the mentality of separate nations, little would have been achieved. Instead a momentum of cooperation and common identity developed.

We need to promote a sense of common destiny and the reality of inter-dependence in the Middle East. We need new strategies, promoted by the European Union, for economic development and democracy promotion in the region. We need to undermine historic differences, by encouraging economic development, investing in infrastructure, promoting human capital, freeing up finance, and adopting trade and aid policies that can give everyone a stake in that common future. These policies will require some difficult choices - both in the Middle East and in Europe. But it is vital that we start that process. Only if we do can the formal peace process succeed.

Conclusion

What I have touched on this evening is just one of the very many issues we are facing in Europe, as we struggle with the consequences of globalisation. I could just as easily have discussed climate change, or global poverty, or international crime, or migration, or competitiveness, or relations with China and India, or transatlantic partnership.

All of these questions require the European Union to be forward-thinking and ambitious in rising to the complex challenges ahead. They require the EU to have clear thinking - and institutions that work. As President of the European Parliament, I believe we can offer that critical 'value added' at European level. My job, my work, indeed my political life, has been devoted to pursuing that goal.