

Mr Pat Cox

***Speech at the COMECE (Re)thinking Europe Dialogue on Friday
27 October 2017***

Europe at the crossroads

My dear friends it is an honour and a great pleasure to have been invited to set the scene here today at this historic encounter in the Vatican in the light of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome and in response to Pope Francis's call to dialogue.

It is a privilege to address you this afternoon. However, given the pan European presence at this conference and its open ended agenda most of all I look forward to learning from you tomorrow the fruits of your deliberations and collective wisdom.

When he received the Charlemagne Prize in 2016¹, His Holiness, Pope Francis, quoted Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Nazi death camps, who said that what we need today is a '*memory transfusion*'. '*We need to remember,*' Pope Francis said, '*to take a step back from the present to listen to the voice of our forebears. Remembering will help us not to repeat our past mistakes (cf. Evangelii Gaudium, 108), but also to re-appropriate those experiences that enabled our peoples to surmount the crises of the past*'.

To have arrived in the European Parliament in 1989, as I did, aged thirty-six was to be twice blessed, first with a directly elected mandate to represent my fellow citizens and secondly to bear witness to that *annus mirabilis*. In August at Sopron on the Austrian Hungarian border a hole was cut in the barbed wire border fence leading to what some reported at that time as '*the picnic that changed the world*'. In my study at home I have a piece of that wire wrapped in a tricoloured Hungarian ribbon, a silent witness to the high hopes of that new democratic dawn. Then in November the Berlin Wall came crashing down opening the way for Europe democratically to breathe through its two lungs, East and West, in the words of the then Pope, John Paul II.

I witnessed the transformative power of the ideals and values of Europe in my political group. Simone Veil, who passed away in June, like Elie Wiesel, had survived the death camps. Also in my group were some German colleagues of a similar age, who had fought in the regular army and survived the war. They all worked together on a daily basis in a manner that was routine, even mundane. For me the very ordinariness of their shared European experience and efforts was an extraordinary testament to the healing power of reconciliation.

¹ Conferral of the Charlemagne Prize, Address by His Holiness Pope Francis, Vatican, 6 May 2016

I recall the passionate and final witness of Francois Mitterand before the European Parliament in January 1995 when he declared '*le nationalisme c'est la guerre*'. And a month later when the German President of the Parliament, Klaus Hansch, fifty years to the day after the bombing of Dresden, without rancour or recrimination, rose to speak to honour the dead and of his boyhood memory of his upset at being obliged to wait on a refugee train in a siding outside the city boundaries because it could accommodate no more. By this act of providence he survived that fateful night and lived to construct the alternative.

My political group and I played a prominent role in demanding executive accountability from the Santer European Commission late in 1998. An independent enquiry ultimately led to its forced resignation in 1999. It was an unprecedented and dramatic moment and not something that in conscience or politically was undertaken lightly.

Months later we were scheduled to fight a European election. To rediscover a deeper meaning to our European public purpose, beyond that controversy, as a group we visited Auschwitz-Birkenau, accompanied by four survivors. There also was a old rabbi who with a family member of one of our MEPs had survived by escaping from a holding camp in the Netherlands. The rabbi chanted the Kaddish at the memorial. He lit a candle and then lit those of the survivors who in their turn lit our candles and each symbolically passed to the other the duty to remember.

There was joy also, tears of joy. In Athens in April 2003 at the signing ceremony of the Accession Treaties for the ten new member states due to join the Union a year later. I remember meeting Vytenis Andriukaitis who was then chairman of Lithuanian Seimas European Affairs Committee. He was crying. I enquired why so? He explained that he had just been talking to his ninety five year old mother in Kaunas recalling his deceased father and their parental journey and his own from his birth in a Soviet gulag in Siberia to that moment of optimism and hope in Athens. Today he is the European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety.

We celebrated a moment of pride, when on a lovely May morning in Strasbourg in 2004 the accession to the European Union of the new member states was marked at the Parliament. In a simple ceremony, accompanied by Lech Walensa, we raised the flags of the ten new member states on flagpoles that had been made in the shipyard in Gdansk and that had travelled literally but also symbolically, as a gift from Poland, from the shipyards to this special moment of European communion.

Finally, I recall Maidan in Kiev. There hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians came in search of Europe but they found Ukraine. While Europeans who visited Maidan searching for Ukraine found Europe. Throughout that Revolution of Dignity, Kiev was the only capital city in Europe in 2014 where tens of thousands of citizens carried the European flag as a symbol of hope and optimism.

I share these stories, this personal memory transfusion, with you not to reduce my contribution to the merely anecdotal but to invite each of us to recall that in the midst of our narrative of crisis and challenge there is an abundance of inspiration that can remind us of the deeper meaning and values of the continent we share.

There is a feature that underlies many European debates that perhaps is worth rendering explicit from the outset. This relates to what we should expect the Union to be and to do. For many, including many political scientists, their terms of reference relate to our familiarity with the powers, institutions and capacities of states. Our member states are the repositories of our political, constitutional, institutional, historic and cultural traditions. In terms of budgetary capacity they are the primary actors as regards national economic, health, education and welfare policies. They have a call on our loyalty, and anchor our sense of identity. The European Union is not a state.

Nor is the European Union a classic intergovernmental organisation such as the United Nations, the IMF or the OECD. It is much more. Its governance system is unique. Its budget, though modest in terms of the expectations placed on its shoulders, is by far the largest for any such body in the world. Its single market is the biggest in the world. Within the limits conferred by the Treaties it can act and legislate at a supranational level. Its executive is accountable to a directly elected transnational parliament and to the Council of Ministers drawn from its member states. This also is without precedent in human affairs. All the institutions are subject to the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the EU, whose primacy in the interpretation of EU law is a pillar of the *acquis communautaire*.

Being neither a state nor a classic intergovernmental body, the European Union exists in a state of permanent 'in betweenness'. This poses a real challenge at an encounter such as ours. For those whose European expectations are informed by what they expect a state to do, the EU risks to permanently disappoint by being overburdened with unrealistic presumptions about its current or probable capacity to act. Viewed through the prism of intergovernmental organisations the European Union, on the other hand, is a unique gift through which Europeans can make common cause based on common interests. It facilitates Europeans to address shared cross border and global challenges more effectively together than they could hope to do apart.

There is another general observation about the nature of European integration worth recalling captured in a letter written more than fifty-five years ago by the late American president, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, to Jean Monnet:

'For centuries, emperors, kings and dictators have sought to impose unity on Europe by force. For better or worse, they have failed. But under your inspiration, Europe has moved closer to unity in less than twenty years than it had done before in a thousand. You and your associates have built with the mortar of reason and the brick of economic and political interest. You are transforming Europe by the power of a constructive idea'.²

Key to this constructive idea is choice and not compulsion. This is a unity driven by voluntary engagement. It has not resulted from the point of an imperial sword or

² John F. Kennedy: "Letter to Jean Monnet Commending His Achievements on Behalf of European Unity.," January 23, 1963

from the barrel of an ideological gun. It is based on the free will of free and sovereign peoples. The adoption of the Union's *acquis communautaire* is a chosen act of collective free will by free peoples and not an external imposition.

In this context, I find surprising even offensive the language that has been used by some leading figures that has likened the European Union to the Soviet Union or references to European Commissioners as equivalent to Soviet apparatchiks. Such comparisons are odious and unhistorical. There is no gulag for dissent in the European Union. This is not the Europe of 1956 or 1968 or of martial law. No tanks will roll. This is not the Europe that oppressed Cardinal Mindszenty. This is a Europe where each participating state voluntarily chose to adopt the *acquis communautaire* and what flows from it. This is a Europe based on fundamental rights and values in a family of peoples that balance rights with responsibilities. This is a Europe that strives to listen to the better angels of our nature and to avoid the demonisation of the weakest and of the 'other'.

These values are our common inheritance from our Christian civilisation and from the eighteenth century Enlightenment. They now find expression in our treaties.³ The '*values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities*'.

Our fundamental values have found expression through the norms of constitutional liberal democracy in which individual rights and freedoms are protected and in which the exercise of power is limited by the rule of law, the separation of powers, an independent judiciary and a free press. Only European states which respect these values and are committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the EU.⁴ There are Treaty based preventive and sanctions mechanisms⁵ and a rule of law framework to guard against serious breaches of fundamental values.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Vice President Timmermans on the role he is playing on behalf of the European Union in this regard, earning him the entirely unjustified title of the 'new grand inquisitor' bestowed by Hungary's Prime Minister several months ago.⁶ He is doing the European Union, its citizens and its values some service.

There is concern about the emergence of a discourse on illiberal democracy, about checks and balances, about concentrations of political and economic power, about weakening the role of independent judiciaries, about control over traditional media and about curtailing civil society. For the European Union, and for a continent so scarred by the savagery that befell it in the first half of the twentieth century, to be eternally vigilant about fundamental rights and values is the price of our liberty.

³ Article 2, Treaty on European Union

⁴ Article 49, Treaty on European Union

⁵ Article 7, Treaty on European Union

⁶ Viktor Orbán, speech at the 28th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp, 22 July 2017

Politics of course is a broad church. Political leadership and its styles come in many forms, cool, courageous, compassionate, combative, charismatic, cynical. You each here will recognise qualities of this sort to varying degrees in those who lead in your home states. Values can be at the heart of one politician's actions or be used as rhetorical ornamentation by another. Politics is called upon distil the actionable vision of a society into workable and deliverable outcomes. Ideally it is a vocation of public service but sometimes it can be more about self than societal enrichment. Vision and values are two essential vectors in a more complex matrix of political choice. There is the question of mediating competing interests along the entire spectrum from the marginalised poor to well connected oligarchs. Even where one may wish to act it does not follow necessarily that one has the capacity to act. Capacity can be constrained by budgetary, legal, institutional or political constraints. Even when vision, values and capacity are aligned there remains the matter of the political will to act, realpolitik, from the compassionate, for example, that something must be done, whatever the short term political consequences, because it is right; to the colder calculation as to how this will play with the electorate at the next election or the with commentariat in the next news cycle.

Asked when he was British Prime Minister what he feared most in politics, Harold Macmillan answered: '*Events, dear boy, events*'. Coping with unforeseen events especially if they are on a grand scale can overwhelm even the best political systems. Crisis demands immediate attention causing the urgent to displace the merely necessary on the political agenda. Political capital is a scarce resource and is spent quickly when the impact of a crisis is grave. The European Union has just survived almost a decade of consecutive crises. To have done so is a measure of resilience but of course survival alone does not suffice.

Europe's difficult decade has been marked by a series of crises whose consequences are now visible on the electoral maps of her member states. Mass unemployment, especially youth unemployment, rising poverty and social inequality on one side and fears about bailouts, a transfer Union and unorthodox monetary policy on the other have led to a North/South cleavage. Unprecedented migratory flows, especially during 2015 from the Syrian civil war, have brought in their wake unprecedented internal political tensions about the protection of the EU's external borders and nationally at the borders of several member states, leading to an East/West cleavage. Terrorist attacks have heightened a sense of vulnerability and insecurity and blurred the boundaries between internal and external security policy. Russia's annexation of Crimea, its destabilisation of Donbas, its muscle flexing, cyber sabotage and disinformation campaigns have revived older memories and fears.

The result has been that trust in politics and political institutions both national and European was eroded. Trust between member states was strained. It led Jean Claude Juncker to share his fears very frankly with the European Parliament one year ago. It is worth quoting in extenso what he said at that time: '*I have witnessed several decades of EU integration. There were many strong moments. Of course, there were many difficult times too, and times of crisis. But never before have I seen such little common ground between our Member States. So few areas where they agree to work together. Never before have I heard so many leaders speak only of their domestic problems, with*

*Europe mentioned only in passing, if at all. Never before have I seen representatives of the EU institutions setting very different priorities, sometimes in direct opposition to national governments and national parliaments. It is as if there is almost no intersection between the EU and its national capitals anymore. Never before have I seen national governments so weakened by the forces of populism and paralysed by the risk of defeat in the next elections. Never before have I seen so much fragmentation, and so little commonality in our Union. Never before have I seen such little common ground between our member states.*⁷It was stark, honest and true.

Anger, resentment, disillusionment and fear have fuelled a new rise in populism of the left and the right. The result is that our politics has become more volatile, more contested and more fragmented. The European Parliament elections of 2014 signalled the trend. In five member states, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy and the UK parties campaigning on an anti EU platform won between a fifth and a quarter of the vote. Successively, in election after election at member state level incumbent governments have lost seats or power or both. Traditional parties of the centre, left and right, have lost ground in every election. Political fragmentation has made post election coalition building slower and more complex. The tapestry of our political systems has become more varied and diverse and consequently mobilising governing majorities will present a more intricate challenge.

This year Jean Claude Juncker's address to the European Parliament was decidedly more upbeat: *'The wind is back in Europe's sails. But we will go nowhere unless we catch that wind. (...) Now is the time to build a more united, stronger and more democratic Europe for 2025.'*⁸ Rhetorically and politically it was an extraordinary mood change which deserves a pause for thought.

As a weather vane of how the wind is blowing, economically, the EU has turned the corner. For the past two years economic growth in the EU has outpaced Japan and the USA. This year every member state in the Union recorded positive economic growth. Unemployment remains high but is at its lowest level since the economic and financial crisis hit. The trend has turned. A new EU frontier and coast guard service is now fully operational. The flow of migrants has slowed down but Africa's anticipated demographic explosion in the coming decades reminds us that we will need new development policies in our armoury if we are to cope with this unprecedented change. The tide of euroscepticism which risked to overwhelm the union has been contained, particularly marked by the rise of Macronisme in France. The EU now stands ready to carry the torch for the fight against climate change, for an open global trading system based on reciprocity and for doing more together on security and defence.

Two political events one internal and one external have been indispensable to the change of mood, Brexit and the election of President Trump.

⁷ Jean Claude Juncker, State of the Union Address, European Parliament, Strasbourg, 14 September 2016

⁸ Jean Claude Juncker, State of the Union Address, European Parliament, Strasbourg, 13 September 2017

When the United Kingdom voted in June 2016 to leave the European Union it epitomised the *annus horribilis* captured by the Commission President's 2016 remarks as quoted above. Whether this would be an isolated event or a trigger for a domino effect was the subject of considerable speculation. Brexit is an unprecedented and regrettable first act of disintegration whose countdown has begun. It reconfirms in the most visible way the voluntary and sovereign foundation of every member states' EU engagement. Almost certainly at midnight on March 29 2019 the United Kingdom will stand on the threshold of a transition period marking its passage from European Union membership to third country status; or if talks, have crashed and burned, the UK will trip over a cliff's edge into the hardest exit option of all for all, no deal. A third but improbable scenario, in the light of its current mood and febrile political and media climate, is that the UK could change its mind and seek to stay.

In practice, the shock of Britain's choice jolted public opinion across all member states of the Union, with numerous opinion polls revealing that every state registered an increase in popular support for remaining in the EU. It was a wake up call not to take the Union or membership for granted. The level of consensus to date in defining the EU's negotiating mandate, the conduct of negotiations and the inter-institutional harmony, as exhibited by European Parliament resolutions and Council conclusions, suggests a high degree of EU coherence and unity, which may be tested by the devil in the detail of the later stages of negotiation. One could conclude already at this stage that Britain's exit is more likely to energise than paralyse the Union, or as President Juncker remarked: *'it is not the future of Europe.'*

The European Union is the world's most advanced and integrated regional polity. Its bilateral and multilateral relations are built on a dense network of Treaties and agreements. We have relied on and profited from the open and liberal post war global order and, through NATO, from Pax Americana. The election of President Trump calls much of that order into question. Signalling his protectionist instincts the President abandoned the Trans Pacific Trade Partnership on his first day in office. A visit to the Vatican and a personal presentation by Pope Francis of the encyclical on climate change, *Laudatio Si*, was followed by the announcement that the United States would cease participation in the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change mitigation. After a settling-in period the President has confirmed the traditional alliances of the USA with Korea, Japan and NATO, perhaps more by necessity than personal conviction. To the amazement of other international allies President Trump has declared his intention to withdraw from the Iran nuclear accord. He has talked tough on North Korea and succeeded in getting tougher sanctions passed at the UN. It is too soon to discern whether this is a presidency whose bark will be worse than its bite, or whether the USA under Trump is becoming a revisionist power whose legacy will be one of rupture on the international stage. In any event like President Putin's revanchism and Britain's Brexit the arrival of President Trump with his 'America First' philosophy summons the European Union to contemplate greater self-reliance in Europe's interest.

Even as the European macro economy began to improve the question emerged as to whether economic recovery was about to be accompanied by a democratic recession.

Any review of the change of mood in Europe would be incomplete without reference to what happened in the French elections earlier this year with the extraordinary emergence of Emmanuel Macron as French President and of his new party as the main party of government. Political volatility in the case of France repeated the trend decline in the share of votes of the traditional parties of the centre, left and right. In this case it was a new centre and not populism that gained. Unlike most national political campaigns the debate on the future of France was inextricably bound up with the future of Europe debate. It was an existential moment for a European France and for the European Union as a whole. Emmanuel Macron's campaign, his mandate, his energy, his age and his enthusiasm for a re-foundation of the European Union signal the beginning of a new chapter in Franco-German rapprochement which inevitably will revitalise the future of Europe debate. There is a window of opportunity. Whether what some saw recently as a European twilight will become a new dawn depends on political leadership but also on popular consent and engagement.

As regards popular consent and engagement President Macron has set out his view clearly. 'We should not fall into the trap of populists and extremists which consists of saying let us put the question simplistically in a yes or no manner. The answer is known, it is always no, irrespective of the question'.^{9/10} 'We need to overhaul the European project', he argues, 'through and with the people, with much greater democratic stringency than a mere binary question. He proposes democratic conventions before the European Parliament elections of 2019 to fuel 'our roadmap for tomorrow's Europe.'

This brings us full circle back to our dialogue. The European Commission has organised hundreds of citizens' dialogues in the past several years, as has the European Parliament. How to engage citizens in a truly meaningful dialogue can be an elusive pursuit. The Union's most strident critics delight in presenting it in caricature terms as an elite conspiracy against the common man. This hypothesis is a subset of a more general populist discourse that has emerged since the global economic crisis. It is accentuated by ageing demography and the technological and digital revolution. The displaced, the losers in the winner/loser paradigm, have proved to be fertile territory for populist and extremist politics. Simple solutions are proffered for complex challenges. Who can forget President Trump's candid admission – 'Who would have thought healthcare could be so complicated?' In Europe this has been presented as dialectic between so-called patriot nationalists and out of touch elites. It is the essence of Trumpism in the USA and UKIP in the UK. It is part of today's political landscape.

⁹ President Emmanuel Macron, Speech, La Sorbonne, Paris, 26 September 2017

¹⁰ This observation is broadly borne out by the facts with the exception of Ireland. Denmark's rejection of the Maastricht Treaty (1992), Sweden's rejection of a referendum on the Euro (2003), the failure of the Constitutional Treaty referendum in two founding member states, France and the Netherlands (2005), the loss of referenda on the Nice Treaty (2001) and the Lisbon Treaty (2007) in Ireland, the rejection of a Danish referendum to opt-in to EU Justice and Home Affairs (2015), a Dutch rejection of the Association Agreement with Ukraine (2016) and the British Referendum to Remain or Leave the EU (2016). Ireland has held nine European referenda since 1972. Seven of those referenda were carried by majorities, including the Treaties of Nice and Lisbon at second asking.

Recall that there are more populist and extremist politicians elected to parliaments across our continent today than at any time since the second world war. From this we can draw a clear conclusion. EU politics and not just national politics will be both *'more contested and politicised'* and *'the future of the EU will be more overtly political than in the past.'*¹¹

What we have learned sixty years on from the Treaty of Rome is that inside the European Union we have arrived at an advanced stage of mutual interdependence and vulnerability as our crises have shown. We could choose to suffer the delusion that we can take back control, turn back the clock and put our own interests first, isolated from each other in mutually exclusive sovereign bubbles. Or we can recognise that on the continent on which we live and in the world, which we share, even our national interests can best be served and realised through intelligent interdependence, common vision and mutually respectful compromise.

The church has a role to play and a contribution to make to this debate. When he received EU leaders on the eve of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, Pope Francis *'left them in no doubts as to his personal faith in the Union's future'*. One should recall that *'the Catholic church has been benignly disposed to the European project from the outset,'*¹² and that its community straddles all parts of the Union, north, south, east and west.

I am reminded of a quotation, attributed to Massimo d'Azeglio, used more than once in my company by my friend the late Professor Bronislaw Geremek:
'l'Italia è fatta. Restano da fare gli Italiani.' Italy has been made. It remains to make her Italians. We could add here today - *Europa è fatta. Restano da fare gli europei.* Europe needs her Europeans. Passive engagement is not enough. The debate for hearts and minds is on the ground, close to home, day to day and issue by issue. Listening is essential to dialogue. Winning is about persuading not defeating.

It has been a privilege to have been invited to set the scene for the debates and dialogue which follow. On my own behalf and, if I may on yours also, let me thank the Vatican and COMECE for taking this initiative on (Re)thinking Europe. I look forward with anticipation to your ideas tomorrow afternoon.

Thank you.

Pat Cox
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Vatican
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¹¹ Brigid Laffan, *The Growing Disaffection for the European Project: How to rise to the challenge*, MacGill Summer School, Glenties, 18 July 2017

¹² Patrick H. Daly, *The Church in Dialogue with the European Union*, *Doctrine and Life*, Vol.67, September 2017