



“THE ARMENIAN DIASPORA”

Speech to a Conference on the Armenian Diaspora in the European Parliament

29th April 1999

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the European Parliament. Welcome to this strange but wonderful building. I believe that in one hundred years it will be a much-loved symbol of parliamentary democracy. Unlike the Council of Ministers building, clearly designed by the architects of Kafka Castle, this is a building full of glass, full of openness, designed to be big enough to be a Parliament for all Europeans.

Benjamin Disraeli, whose record on Armenia I do not endorse, once said that universities should be places of “light, liberty and learning”. I believe the same of Parliaments, and especially of Parliaments in Europe. I welcome your meeting, I welcome your choice of venue. I would say to the Turkish Embassy, who have expressed a certain nervousness, that openness, debate and dialogue are the essence of what it is to be European at the end of this Twentieth Century.

I talked yesterday to the President of Parliament, and I know how sad he is not to be able to be with us today. You will understand that these are intensely busy days for the President.

It gives me particular pleasure to welcome you as Chairman of the Foreign Affairs, Security and Defence Policy Committee. I and the Committee are believers in the usefulness of ‘parliamentary diplomacy’. We believe that Parliaments can say and do things which governments dare not do. I believe we have played a useful role in Algeria, in Albania and in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, where governments walk with such care across thin ice that they often cease to walk at all.

In the Committee we have made a point of inviting the unavoidable. We insisted on talking to the Serbian Chargé d’Affaires before Easter. Two years ago we invited the Foreign Minister of the Republic of China and Taiwan - which caused a certain dismay in Beijing. I had to explain to the Ambassador of the Peoples’ Republic that Parliaments are not governments, they may, they must, listen to whom they choose. I also had to explain to the Ambassador the roots of the European Parliament’s concern about human rights go deep into the psyche of Europe. It is exactly because of our bloodstained abuse of Human Rights in this and past centuries that we are so concerned about human rights, both here and abroad.

I am proud of this Parliament. In a world where the power of the Executive grows ever stronger, this Parliament has for over twenty years stood up to the coercion of the Executive - whether represented by the Commission or the Council, both of whom have democratic mandates more appropriate to Byzantium than to a modern Europe. I am proud that this Parliament has had the courage to strike down political and diplomatic taboos. In 1983, on a suggestion of mine, we condemned Stalin’s Terror Famine for what it was, a massive and organised genocide. I remember the concern at the time that by so doing we would offend the Soviet Union, with dire commercial consequences. I am doubly proud that in June 1987 we became the first Parliament to recognise the Armenian genocide.

We all know the learned and not so learned debate about the use of the word genocide. Often it is abused for rhetorical purposes. But genocide is something you know when you see. We know that what a European culture did to the Native Americans was genocide. We know what happened in Rwanda. We know that ‘ethnic cleansing’ in Bosnia was genocide, when it involved an attack on an entire culture and people designed to move, disrupt and destroy a whole society. There is a psychology of genocide and there is a causal link between such events. In facing up to the historic truths, we are not just paying our debts to intellectual honesty, we are acting to deter the next genocide planner. Whether Hitler in Poland or Milosevic in Kosovo, the sordid understanding which permits the act is the belief that the world will forget.

I have just returned from two trips to the Balkans, to Skopje and to Sofia. I visited Stankovic, the largest of the Kosovar camps in Macedonia. As an amateur medieval historian, I know the complexity

of history and of its consequences. I know how much nineteenth century nationalism invented myths for modern use. How it is not true to talk of centuries of age-old feuds. How communities which lived at peace with each other, could have their fear and poverty inflamed by demagogues.

Kosovo is an immediate challenge for European Union to recognise its responsibility in the whole of Europe. This takes us to the delicate question of defining Europe's eastern border, a border set by culture and history, rather than by geography. Mrs Thatcher was regarded as radical when she asserted in her speech in 1988 that Prague, Vienna and Budapest were great European cities as much as London, Rome and Paris. She stretched the envelope of empathy to the east. That sense of what is Europe has now been pulled as far as the western shores of the Black Sea. It forces us to define our relationship with Europe's great neighbours, with Russia, the Ukraine, with Turkey, Egypt and Algeria

What does this mean for Georgia and Armenia on, and beyond, the eastern shores of the Black Sea? Professor Huntington would have us believe that the next century will see a clash of civilisations. His definitions of civilisation are rather artificial and unconvincing - but the popularisation of his views see us facing a clash between Christianity and Islam. Such a future would be full of menace for Armenia, that has millennia of experience of living on tectonic plates, both geologically and geopolitically between civilisations.

Armenians also have centuries of experience of Western politicians, from the Crusades onwards, making elegant speeches of support, armed only with a little history and a dose of romantic sympathy for "the oldest Christian state". I do not want to add to that sad litany of betrayal. There is a great and abiding sympathy for Armenia, but you will know its limits. The Almighty has decreed that the map of Armenia lies in an area of political, ideological and religious complexity. Made more difficult now by the criss-crossing of pipelines and the dangerous proximity of Caspian oil and Central Asian politics.

But let us heed the words of the mystics: "The Map is not the Territory". Maps are models we make of a certain reality. The reality is the people of Armenia - both at home and in the diaspora. It is your identity which is sacred, which you have never allowed to be swallowed or diluted. Individual Armenians joined Europe centuries ago. You have made a huge contribution to our economic and intellectual life. I have no doubt that now you make an even greater contribution to binding Armenia to Europe.

Enjoy your stay here in Parliament. Perhaps as you return to a Europe preparing to vote, you would do us the honour of saying that you have been inside this building and survived! That inside this Europe there does beat a heart with a sense of soul and a sense of justice for all Europeans.



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