

“EAST MEETS WEST IN THE NEW EUROPE”

Speech as Chairman of the Foreign Affairs, Security and Defence Policy Committee of the European Parliament at the opening of the European Parliament Conference on the Parliamentary Dimension of the Royaumont Process, Brussels

21st September 1998

Welcome to the European Parliament. I am delighted to host this meeting of the Parliamentary Dimension of the Royaumont Process, on behalf of my colleagues from the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Joint Parliamentary Committees and Delegations to South East Europe. I welcome my friend and former colleague, Mr. Roumeliotis the Coordinator of the Royaumont Process, whose creativity and tireless work I salute. I welcome my colleagues from the Foreign Affairs Committees of the European Union. I, and they, will be reporting on this meeting to the Committee of Chairmen of Foreign Affairs Committees at its meeting next week in Vienna. I welcome the distinguished representatives of international institutions. As befits a Parliamentary discussion this is an open meeting and I welcome members of the media and representatives of civil society who are here today. But most of all I welcome you, Ladies and Gentlemen, who chair the Foreign Affairs Committees of the Royaumont Process countries.

We are gathered to discuss ways of strengthening the Parliamentary Dimension of a Process designed to encourage stability and good neighbourliness. No doubt each of you is the bearer of important and urgent messages about the difficult situation in the Balkans. I will of course give each of you the floor to say what must be said as eloquently, and hopefully, as concisely as possible. As is traditional I will attempt a summing up at five o'clock this afternoon, but I stress that this is a conversation not a negotiation; an opportunity for institution building and the examination of the roots of good-neighbourliness, rather than for the rhetoric of conflict.

Let me declare two beliefs at the outset of our ‘conversation’. I believe that a path to lasting stability in the Balkans can only be found in the context of membership of the European Union, and that the lessons of the hard-won unity of two thirds of the continent should be learnt now for the benefit of the remaining third. That will require not just herculean efforts by the politicians of the Balkans, but also equal efforts by the politicians of the Union, who all too often have acted naively and ignorantly. We have proposed to admit Slovenia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria to the Union, and thereby declared ourselves irreversibly involved in the politics of the Balkans, without for a moment understanding what that involves for us.

Secondly I have a passionate belief in the dignity and importance of parliamentarians. Not as cogs in a legislative wheel; not as adjuncts of governments or servants of parties, but as guardians of the language of our people. We are ‘Story tellers’ to our tribes, and interpreters of the world to our electorates in a time of troubles. We can fill this room today with images of hate or of hope; we can leer at each other or learn from each other; we can stress our similarities or our differences.

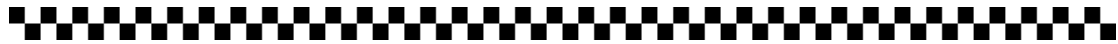
With your permission let me make my contribution as a ‘story teller’. Let me therefore tell a tale, a tale of two rivers: The Rhine and the Danube. If we look down from space on this strange Cape of Eurasia that we call Europe we cannot see lines on a map. We can see rivers on a territory. Two great waterways, two arteries of Europe - one defining the North West quadrant and one the South East quadrant. If we had been meeting sixty years ago we would have had to confront the reality of North West Europe as a region of ancient hatreds and of endless border disputes. A region of clashes between national and Christian cultures of insoluble complexity. A region marked by the hazy boundaries of ancient empires and an attachment to bloodstained histories. A region so self-obsessed that the very word ‘Europe’ had become a synonym in more settled parts of the world for bloodshed and division. Does this description sound familiar?

Sixty years is a moment in the history of a civilisation, and I see nothing which stops our generation applying to the Danube that which our parents' generation applied to the Rhine. Such a process starts in the vocabulary of parliamentarians prepared to confront the self-deception and ignorance of each other, which fuels repeated conflict. I cannot speak for the parliamentarians of the Balkans, but I can address myself to the attitudes of parliamentarians in the rest of Europe.

I have this morning deliberately used the word "Balkans", rather than the neutral phrase "South East Europe", because the word still carries a horror and defeatism which the rest of Europe must confront. We must confront the fear that the Balkans is not Europe. Is not Europe because it is poor: fifty years ago all of Europe was poor. Is not Europe because it is agricultural: fifty years ago the rest of Europe lived on and by the land. Is not Europe because for 600 years it was ruled by the Crescent not the Cross. We do not exclude Spain and Portugal on the grounds of a 700 year occupation. Not Europe because many of its societies are rooted in Orthodox rather than Catholic or Protestant Christianity. In June of next year a symposium on Religion, Science and the Environment, under the auspices of President Jacques Santer and His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, will sail from Regensburg to the Black Sea accompanied amongst others by the Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna, the Anglican Bishop of London and leading Jewish and Muslim figures. I welcome the coordinator of that symposium Mrs Maria Becket, who is here today and I salute the wisdom of Jacques Santer and his All Holiness in wanting to pray for peace with all four of the religions of the area at Vukovar.

We need to accept that our nations were not as clearly defined or as glorious as we pretend. We need to accept that our religions were not as pure and unpolitical as we would wish. Throughout our history, we Europeans have shared our heresies, our dubious alliances and our capacity for self-deception.

There is a wise injunction from the mystics that should have a special resonance for Parliamentarians-"the map is not the territory". We should not mistake the way we frame or describe issues for the reality. For far too long we have consigned the Balkans to the map makers. Now is the time to reclaim the debate for those who see it as a territory. It gives me great pleasure therefore to hand the 'speaking stick' of this meeting to Mr. Roumeliotis, who with the ancient wisdom of his tribe, knows this territory.



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