

Brussels, 18 September 2003

Speech by Pat COX at the Conference on "European Public Opinion and the 2004 European Elections"

The first thing I want to say to all of you is, of course, a very warm word of welcome to the European Parliament. I am extremely pleased that we have the opportunity today to host this conference, and to see such a large turnout from so many diverse but connected actors in the academic, media, diplomatic and political fields. The usual spiel to start off a conference is to tell how timely this event is; and forgive me if I appear to lapse into a cliché, but I really do think the timing of this is just about perfect. We will have, next year, between the 10th and the 13th of June, something that on a truly continental scale our old continent has never experienced before. We will have elections for the European Parliament from the Atlantic coast of my Munster Irish constituency, to the Eastern borders of the Baltic states. In that we have a unique moment, unparalleled in terms of scale and diversity, also the common opportunity to express a democratic assent and to mandate people on a five-year mission to deal with this new Europe, "la grande Europe" as they say, on a truly continental scale.

We start in two weeks' time, 4 October in Rome, the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) which will deal with the draft constitutional treaty. The European Parliament will officially adopt its resolution, before that summit meeting, next week in Strasbourg. However, it's plain to me that already there is a clear majority in the Parliament that appreciates greatly the work of the Convention and the broad balances it has produced in the draft treaty, and that would appreciate an early and not a late closure to the IGC proceedings. I don't today want to digress into the detail on the Convention, but to observe with you a different point. Eventually, whether concluded by the end of the Italian presidency or whether concluded during the subsequent Irish presidency, I think it is greatly to be desired that the final product, that constitutional treaty, should be available in time for the next European election. Not because the election itself is the process of ratification that variously will be carried out by referendum or by the constitutional traditions through representative democracy, chosen by the Member States. It is a public opportunity nonetheless, whichever form of ratification is chosen by states already to engage in the debate on the elements of the constitutional treaty, and on the dynamics and platforms which it can offer to a European policy community going forward.

If I take those two events and just that conjunction, the Europe of 25 and the constitutional treaty, without yet coming to any other political debates, we have a unique conjunction of Europeanness available as raw material in a form and on a scale that frankly I don't think we've quite had before at moments of direct elections to the European Parliament. So one theme which I want to develop here today, and for next year, for my and for our institutional communications platform and strategy, is to ask the question, when we have the sixth direct elections next June, could we not have for the first time perhaps our first genuinely European election? The previous European elections, and here you are the experts in terms of the psephology and the tracing of the roots and tracking the evolution of public opinion, in my politician's experience have been mostly about everything but European issues. Of course, European issues come up, but the elections are also about mid-term tests of the popularity of a government. This is life and this will not change, there's no point in being naïve. They're about media interest in personality "x" or "y" and who comes up and who goes down and so on, and this doesn't change because this also is life. But we really do have next year these other fundamentally powerful and different elements. Along with all the other things that feed into an electoral process, let's feed Europe and European issues into the European election and let's have a genuinely European feel about this debate.

We propose, from next January onwards, details to follow but at least now developing the strategy, to try to mobilise another new platform. We will have, for the first time in a statutory form, European political parties. I want, with the assistance of the European political parties, next January, across all 25 states, to meet with the people from the political engine rooms of the parties at home planning the European election. I'm not interested to invite here to Brussels the presidents of the parties for a photocall and a hot dinner. I actually want to get the people, where I would use the phrase, and I'm a former secretary general of a political party, who have the dirt under their fingernails, who are the earthy types, who have to go out there and actually kick-start the substance of campaign planning, organisation and design. And to say to them, in addition to all the other things they want to do, like mid-term tests of the government and promote different political personalities, please do Europe also. Please put it in there. Please develop your parties' perspective on European themes. Then we will have the full polemical range and spectrum and diversity of political preference to engage in that European debate.

I want to promote that message with those people so that we begin already to try to create a climate that says Europe also, and not just that more traditional platform. I want also to do it, separately, with media organisations. Here my own guess is that we need to try to find the people who would be doing the resource planning and the general editorial mapping for that period of time in the year. So that may not necessarily be the journalist who's writing the story. It may not even be someone who in some sense is a European specialist - all the better because our citizens are not European specialists, but these are the people who have to come and vote in the election.

In all of this we're up for it. We want to do some heavy lifting, to play our part and to try to motivate and interest. In doing this, it's not just about constitutions and institutions in terms of the constitutional treaty. There's some real bread-and-butter arguments out there. Let's have them. The stability and growth pact. Dogma or practice? Good or bad? Dead or alive? There's a big debate there. Too often, I think, there's a European tendency to shy away from having the big debates of that sort, because we don't want somebody to undermine something. When did the light of political argument ever undermine a political process? This is actually a debate which makes Europe real. People want to know how does this impact in a real way. Let's have the debate, and whichever are the forces, the substance, the logic and, I daresay, the polemics, let's go for it. Let's get a feeling out of this electoral platform, shaping a new parliament, which will be intimately

engaged in the appointment process of a new Commission, and about how those feelings articulate themselves in the next step forward in the new institutions.

There are so many other issues. Europe's Iraqi crisis, here I don't talk of Iraq's Iraqi crisis. Europe's Iraqi crisis revealed disturbing, but not new deep fault lines. About the nature of Europe's engagement and between some theories of the Atlantic engagement and some multilateral theories of an alternative form. Again like the stability pact, I would say don't step back from it, let's head right in there. If we are going to eventually think about appointing a foreign minister, and developing a more coherent strategy, if we don't deal with the politics of the fault line, we won't deal with the heart and the core of the hard questions that we may be called upon to answer, at some future date in our roles as Parliament and Commission and Council. And where I would greatly value advice and assistance, especially from the work which is led by Professor Sinnott and the others, on tracking and evaluating voter and citizen connection, is from the product of your academic labour; you could distil out for the kind of strategy we're developing some key practical messages that I can use.

If I may digress, I will tell a small story. Many years ago, my first electoral experience was a negative one. I ran as a candidate in a local election in the city where I lived in Limerick, in 1979. I wasn't elected, and I found it a wonderful learning experience about what not to do and who to watch out for the next time. These are invaluable lessons that, of course, in any walk of life you pick up as you go along. I remember one evening attending a preparatory meeting before this campaign took off, to do the canvassing and door-to-door knocking, which is the Irish tradition, not uniquely Irish, but the way we do our politics. Someone stood up, a minister, and gave a very erudite policy speech and said all the things the party was going to stand for, and bring forward. There was a very old guy, since deceased, who said, " Minister", he said, "Cut out all that policy talk. You just give us the balls and we'll fire them". He wasn't referring to anatomy I assure you, but cannon balls - you give us the ammunition and we'll shoot off. Now, I want to make the point a little bit, could you give us the balls and we'll fire them? If you've got some of that kind of ammunition to put energy and focus into our strategy of saying, that the sixth direct election should be Europe's first election. I don't think the particular trend to do with European Parliament turnout can be entirely separated out from the trend to do with western democracy and participation in general. We may be a particular case, but it's a bigger virus. There is a general question to do with citizens and engagement with democratic process. But, where we've had ultra low turnout, I would like to hear if there are useful things we can do. I know it's a bit trite to tell it, partly it's more amusing than substantial, but it does say something shocking: more people voted in Channel 4's Big Brother programme than voted in the European election last time in the United Kingdom. Now, they could vote twice in Big Brother, because no-one regulated the system, so it may exaggerate a bit, but there's something profoundly disturbing that I could make such an observation, trite as it is. So how do we connect to the spaces that have a tendency towards ultra-low turnout? Or are there other deeper forces? Post imperial blues and other forces which, whatever our energy, cannot be penetrated? I would be greatly interested to be guided by insights from yourselves.

So, please give us ammunition. Give some focus, and enter our political strategy to make the election in 2004 Europe's first European election.