

Uniting instead of dividing: communicating the European idea

European Association of Communication Directors

Keynote Introductory speech

Residence Palace, Brussels

Tuesday 12 June 2007

Pat Cox

President, International European Movement

**Managing Partner, European Integration Solutions
patcox@eu-is.com**

Introduction

Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today and I thank you for the invitation. As we meet inside the Brussels beltway to contemplate the theme of communicating the idea of Europe permit me briefly to define some terms. Reductionism rules when it comes to discussing this topic. It does so through a form of conflation. Europe, with apologies to the non-EU Europeans present, generally is reduced to being synonymous with the territory of the European Union. In its turn the EU is reduced to being described as Brussels. Brussels, for better or worse, has become a shorthand or byword for bureaucracy and technocracy and so the great idea and the ideals behind the European project struggle to find adequate articulation. This is my point of departure. My remarks today try to explore why the idea of Europe continues to struggle to connect with an elusive popular opinion.

Planet Europe

We meet in the heartland of planet Europe. It is wonderful for me to be able to talk to you directly without the need for translation. As visiting earthlings I commend your cosmopolitan interplanetary linguistic skills which have allowed you to become expert in Euro-speak as members of the European Association of Communication Directors. Such skills permit and even encourage advanced interplanetary dialogue. It makes things so much easier, especially for the likes of me.

I could talk about ESDP and its relationship with NATO and later will return to some aspects of EU foreign policy making. However, I do not intend this morning to develop a commentary of the role of the ECB in managing the EMU, nor of the investment prerogatives of the EIB nor the EBRD, however interesting these might be. The CFSP which belongs to the second pillar and JHA which constitutes the third pillar are a part of the system which emphasises a greater role for intergovernmentalism. Where possible, as you know, insiders prefer the Community Method of decision making in the delivery of the acquis. Reform of the CAP, whether in the Guidance or Guarantee sections of expenditure, is an evergreen topic but alas for another day, in particular for next year when we get around to discussing future financial perspectives. Those of you into R&D will look to FP7 for policy

direction and finance. I know that those whose focus is on the development of social or economic infrastructure will concentrate on the ESF, the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund, or, if it concerns development policy overseas, the EDF.

If you need to discuss policy formulation doubtlessly you have good contacts inside the relevant Commission DGs and, should the issue pertain to legislative co-decision, I am sure you will have plenty of contacts with MEPs in the EPP, the PSE, the ALDE and the UEN, not to mention the GUE and others. A good fall back is still to rely on contacts in COREPER especially when decisions are made by QMV and subject to co-decision. But then you know all this already since you are numbered among the initiated and are close to the inner circle. If you do not know what all this stuff means where have YOU gone wrong?

To refer to an endless list of acronyms and special terms, I admit, risks to be banal and one could do so with equal facility for every system of governance in the world at national, regional or local level. Yet in most of these other systems citizens are more likely to have regular, personal and direct contact with the system in question. Indirectly they are likely to know more about member state systems through local and national media and through their inherited national political culture which is deeper and more embedded than its European equivalent. Planet Europe is another place. This makes the language of its inner workings more perplexing and remote from its citizens. Conversely the need for plain language and ease of self expression is all the more necessary.

These latter qualities of simplicity in expression are not the first to come to mind when contemplating today's EU and so undue complexity and remoteness in the use of language remains a communication's Achilles heel of this noble project. The Union's institutions invest heavily in interpreting and translating volumes of information into twenty two working languages but as regards popular opinion risk communicating in none because of excessive complexity and the near absence of basic European civic education in our schools decades into our common European journey.

Multicultural communications challenge

No other public administration in Europe and probably none in the world face such a multilingual, multicultural communications challenge. The internet age has opened up new possibilities. These have been well exploited by the Union's europa.eu web site which is an impressive multilingual information resource. There is little by way of basic information and explanation or by way of detailed policy that cannot be found on this excellent site regarding the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council. Yet the referenda of 2005 were lost in the information age, reminding us that availability of information is no guarantee of wider public impact. Communications policy targets different publics, with differentiated messages and by diverse means. It seems to be that a combination of the initiated and the curious use the existing information resources of the EU but popular public opinion in our member states is proving to be a more resistant strain. Why is this so?

Institutional complexity

Europe's cultural complexity is more than matched by its institutional complexity. The idea of Europe was never an easy subject. What we have built together is one of a kind. It has no previous or equivalent template. It is much less than a classic Federation, such as the USA, Canada, Australia, the Federal Republic of Germany or Switzerland. It is much more than merely intergovernmental, such as the United Nations, the IMF or the OECD. This is so because the states that are its component parts have decided that it should be so, on the basis of conferred legal authority through consecutive Treaties and enlargements. What the EU can and cannot do rests in a state of 'in-betweenness', neither fully federal nor fully intergovernmental. This space of subtle shades, during highly political campaigns such as referendum campaigns, is easily trampled under the weight of polemicists and populists in full flight who are prone to exaggerate for the sake of effect. Public confusion and genuine ignorance about how the EU works, itself a legacy of a failure in civic education, is a target-rich environment for easy exploitation. The simple, even the simplistic, often is easier to peddle than the more nuanced reality.

Blame-it-on-Brussels

Civic education is not only for the classrooms alone. It also belongs to everyday media and politics. It is fascinating to behold the interaction between national political elites and the EU in all of our member states over time. It is not the preserve of any one government at any given time. Neither the European Commission nor the European Parliament can make laws on their own. All EU law needs the approval of member states by qualified majority or by unanimity. States are co-responsible for EU law making not passive recipients. When a law is passed at EU level it must be transposed into national law. When it works and is perceived as progressive or popular EU law quickly becomes the product of native genius and of national insight and capacity. When it gives rise to resistance quickly it suffers from 'blame-it-on-Brussels-syndrome', even though the member state in question will have been fully engaged and complicit in the outcome. Indeed sometimes the national political elites desire the outcome but abuse their anti Brussels rhetoric to hide their intent. This equation has an inbuilt anti-Brussels bias. It is like a bank account that removes the credits but saves the debits only for Brussels, a kind of Debit Lyonnais-Brussels style. The accumulated effect over time is corrosive.

This spectacle occasionally is carried to further extremes where Brussels is blamed for things for which it carries no responsibility whatsoever by those in high positions who should and do know better, but who also realise that Brussels is a soft and exploitable target for the release of purely national frustrations. I recall by way of example a statement made by President Chirac blaming Brussels for a decision by the US-based Headquarters of the computer manufacturer Hewlett Packard to downsize in France. It was patently without foundation, regrettably not without precedent, and wholly unfair to the EU and its political authorities. Absent an ethic of self restraint, self indulgence of this sort among senior member state political leaders only contributes to encourage a general mood of popular scepticism about Europe.

European Summits

Arguably, the conduct of European Summits suffers from the same problem. No EU meetings have as much press and media attention. They are unique occasions for telling and selling stories

of EU achievement and occasionally of setbacks. Leaders spend hours arriving at agreement on contested or uncontested Summit Conclusions. These are meticulously elaborated well in advance. When agreed, first resort is to a national press corps which willingly plays the game of how 'we', the national team, promoted or blocked some initiative and saved the day. My point is not that the due expression of national interests and preferences should be avoided, something which would be naive and utopian, but rather that we should also spare a thought for the exercise in hand, namely the articulation of strategic European politics and policies. That in theory is why we hold summits. Imagine a Board of Directors of twenty seven, itself an improbable thought, who give as many different public accounts of their deliberations as their number and then leave the media and public to figure out what was their collective public purpose. It is a less than ideal communications process. Surely it would not be beyond the bounds of possibility to distil from the often excessively long, ritualistic and boring Summit Conclusions a single sheet of key agreed points that all the leaders would follow prior to the addition of their preferred national spins when they deal with their national media.

National media

In general these political and institutional dimensions are reinforced when it comes to media. National and local preferences are to the fore in their coverage, reflecting the truth of, former Congressional Speaker, Tip O' Neill's dictum in the USA that all politics is local. While there are specialist European media outlets and dedicated Brussels correspondents, save for occasional events, these are not prime time or front page copy. Even worse, their output is subject to remote editing and sub-editing at such a cultural and political remove from Brussels and EU institutions that this is more likely to reflect the personal preferences and even prejudices of their home based staff. Their knee jerk reaction often is to suppose that European affairs are by definition boring and uninteresting for their viewers and readers and their tendency therefore is to suppress or downplay the copy or content at hand from Brussels.

European affairs as foreign affairs

If all this was not enough, consider the fact that European Affairs traditionally and currently still remain the prerogative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in member states. Diplomats from foreign ministries are still the key players as Permanent Representatives in Brussels. It may be an efficient method for policy co-ordination and has proved its worth over time but it reflects, even in this the 50th anniversary year of the signing of the Treaty of Rome, the extent to which the European Union symbolically within and for our national administrations remains essentially a matter of foreign policy. It has internal impact but has not really been internalised. We have created Europe but have not been europeanised. We have our Union but we still struggle to find its Europeans, hence my earlier reference to planet Europe connected but still a place apart.

European Parliament elections

Theoretically direct elections to the European Parliament are a platform for offsetting such tendencies. Regrettably this is not the case in practice. Political scientists see these elections as second order elections. Translated into plain language, in terms of outcome they are not perceived as elections where the stakes are high. This is reflected in the fact that to date in the six direct elections to the European Parliament these have been fought state by state on largely national issues and agendas, with European issues struggling to find a platform or failing to yield political traction. As often as not they are a kind of mid term test of the popularity of national governments and provide the electorate with a relatively cost free option to express a protest vote where they wish. I observe this with some personal regret appreciating as I do the vitality and capacity of the European Parliament as an institution. Also when they are confronted with policy choices of a European character my personal experience teaches that the public in general is not short of or shy about expressing its opinions. The establishment of pan EU European political parties to take to the electoral battlefield in the European Parliament elections for the first time in 2009 places a special onus on them to try to generate a genuinely European campaign focus.

Politics needs personalities

Politics needs its personalities and needs personification to succeed, all other things being equal. Here too the EU struggles to assert its presence. The 2009 election offers the prospect to the European political parties to name their champions to lead their election campaigns, even though we have no pan-EU electoral constituencies. The parties should consider nominating their heads of European list, if I may use that inaccurate term, as their candidate to be the President of the subsequent European Commission and should use their post election voting muscle in the European Parliament to deliver such an outcome. Elections need to have something at stake and need to be directly related to post election governance choices. Even this innovation, by virtue of the limited number and nationality of the persons selected and the relative remoteness of the link between a vote cast in a given state or region and the overall result of the European Parliament election, offers no easy road to popularity. It would however put faces and names together with political programmes and begin to lift European politics from its comparative popular anonymity and remoteness.

I recall a role I fulfilled as an election observer for the Liberal Group in the European Parliament at the first free elections in South Africa in 1994. For many months the EU maintained a strong and expensive presence on the ground with hundreds of observers engaged in voter education campaigns and general preparations for the conduct of the country's first ever free elections. It was a valuable contribution to a worthy cause. The EU was not the only player involved but by a large margin was the biggest. With days to go to the election South African television and print media were full of images of one man speaking in praise of the observer missions. He came to personify the entire effort at a key moment of definition. That was Jesse Jackson from the USA. My observation is not to decry him or the USA but rather to ask where were the known European political personalities who could have exhibited and personified in a very real way our collective European effort. I suspect unfortunately that not too much has changed in the meantime as regards collective public relations initiatives for events such as this. Impact matters but it falls short of target when its real value fails to register with public opinion.

Public opinion not hostile to idea of Europe

It would be wrong to conclude that public opinion is hostile to the idea of Europe. For example it consistently has shown itself in polls to be in favour of more Europe. In a campaign called 'Speak Up Europe', under the Commission's Plan D, in which the European Movement has been a lead partner this has emerged as one of the key messages from EU wide public debates and focus groups. The public is prepared to engage with Europe and our conclusions suggest a fruitful role for a more deliberative and open citizen-friendly approach by the EU institutions. What the public appears to want is more Europe especially for example in the conduct of foreign affairs. However what it risks getting in foreign affairs is a higher profile non-Europe.

Intergovernmentalism

It would be higher profile because of the enhanced foreign policy visibility envisaged by the Constitutional Treaty or its successor Treaty through a more powerful foreign policy political leader, whether or not referred to as Minister, assisted by a new European diplomatic service. It would be non-Europe to the extent that the governance process would remain firmly grounded in intergovernmentalism, be subject to unanimity among member states and to the consequences of member state bilateral policy preferences. Intergovernmentalism itself tends to favour policy definition at the level of the lowest common denominator of state interests rather than the highest common European interest.

Complex governance

This is not to argue that the Union's ambition should not be high but policy is easier stated than delivered something which is especially so where the governance responsibilities are shared in a complex way between the Union and its member states.

This was well illustrated by the original version of the Lisbon Agenda for economic reform agreed in that city in 2000. It is now known that the Lisbon Agenda set inflated objectives, underestimated the complexity and inertia confronting their realisation and simultaneously overestimated the relationship between politicians' consensus on targets and their consensus on delivery. It exposed the weakness in a system of governance

which agrees centralised objectives but which depends on decentralised instruments and political will at member state level for their achievement. This was elegantly summarised in the Kok Report as a delivery gap at risk of becoming a credibility gap, already several months before the French and Dutch referenda.

The recent revolutionary targets agreed on energy and climate change deserve a better fate but risk a similar outcome if the Union fails to get its act together. Arguably the instruments of economic policy in the EU are better developed than those for foreign policy. Yet the intergovernmentalist nature of the instruments to achieve the goals of the Lisbon Agenda are a stark reminder of the need to avoid utopian assumptions on what realistically can be delivered by such policy procedures. The dilemma for the Union in capturing the public imagination is to be ambitious and concrete enough in defining and delivering policy targets while being realistic enough to factor in the complex political and institutional realities necessary for their realisation.

Greater coherence depends more heavily on capital cities

Where the wrong balance is struck in terms of the stated level of ambition or the timescale for its achievement resulting delivery gaps risk becoming credibility gaps that in turn could undermine rather than enhance the Union in the eyes of public opinion. This places a strong moral and political responsibility on those leaders who set ambitious targets for eventual future delivery, often probably after their term of office will have expired, to put in place from the outset the governance procedures and policy instruments necessary for success. Treaty reform is essential but offers only part of the answer to this challenge. It leads me to conclude that the prospect of greater unity of purpose and coherence depends more heavily on the unity and effectiveness of member state governments and capital cities than on reforms in Brussels as such, necessary as these may be. Having worked in the European Parliament with thirty Council Presidencies over fifteen years and increasingly so as my own sphere of political authority increased, I have observed the cycle in which states and their political leaders and ministers discover and rediscover Europe and their European convictions only to see them wane with the passage of their Presidencies.

Shared destiny means acting together more

This has got to change. In order to truly reach public opinion Europe needs its hour in the member state sun and this can only happen through honest and loyal engagement from its member states and their leaders, rooted in a genuine sense of shared destiny in those areas where we have agreed as Europeans to act together. It requires in our member states the projection of a consistent and real commitment and not a semi-detached aloofness. It requires giving Brussels credit where it is earned as well as criticism when it is due. It requires coherent member state level media campaigning and the promotion of civic education on European affairs. It is high time to internalise our European project to call planet Europe in from its separate orbit around its member states and to more fully integrate what it stands for and delivers into our daily discourse. This task probably cannot be accomplished by Brussels at all and certainly not on its own even as it tries to engage in wider citizen-friendly outreach. In an enlarged and more diverse EU than ever before, many of whose member states' mainstream politics increasingly has been influenced directly or indirectly by populism and nationalism of the right and the left, this is not an easy prescription but it is no less necessary for that.

Positive balance sheet

As with all debates on the European Union we find ourselves in part amazed at the extent of what we have achieved together in a short few decades and in equal part frustrated by our sense of under fulfilled potential. Yet there is a powerful and positive balance sheet to date.

The dynamics of widening and deepening through successive enlargements and Treaties have combined to give the EU 27 today an impressive global capacity and weight. The EU has a population base of 493 million which, though ageing, represents the third largest in the world after China and India and is almost twice the size of the USA. It is the world's richest single market. It has established the single currency, the Euro, the world's second most important reserve currency. Collectively it is the world's largest trader in terms of share of global trade and a broadly

equivalent share of global GDP. It carries real weight in global trade negotiations and standards setting.

The EU27's leadership on the North/South Partnership, the Millennium Development Goals, climate change and global warming, its leading role as the world's largest donor community of untied non military aid and of humanitarian food aid and its increasing commitment to global crisis management and conflict resolution attest to a growing capacity and willingness to act in global terms.

Shrinking world here to stay

In terms of time and distance ours is a shrinking world. This phenomenon and its associated pace of change are here to stay. We are challenged by globalisation, by ageing demographics, raw material competition, resource scarcity, climate change and new security risks. We live on an increasingly interdependent planet. Our member states more and more sense a shared vulnerability in the face of these new risks. This is strengthening our resolve to act together. We Europeans in the second half of the 20th century designed the most sophisticated institutions ever to foster intelligent interdependence between sovereign states. For Europe's 21st century this can be a cause for hope. In essence if the European project did not already exist it would make sense to invent it today.

The great paradox

This is so in the context of what will be a relentless relative European and Western decline in the 21st century with the rise of emerging economies and powers such as China, India, Brazil and Russia. This process of relative decline will challenge our collective EU capacities but certainly would dwarf us as Europeans if our only capacity to respond was predicated on 19th century concepts of national sovereignty. There is a real vitality and sense of public purpose to what we do together as Europeans. Our great double paradox is that having found our new Europe we struggle within to find our new Europeans, while outside our borders our attractiveness as a beacon of hope is undiminished. My contention is that how we respond to this paradox is the central communications challenge for Europe today.

patcox©2007

