

Lyon 2006 - European Ideas Fair Speeches

European Ideas Fair

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First Roundtable - *Globalisation: Facing the Asian Challenge*

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I would like to focus on three of what I consider to be the main challenges facing our countries. They are, of course, linked. They are:

- - globalisation,
- - the world's energy and climate in the future, and
- - Europe.

As far as globalisation is concerned, it is nothing new for international trade to be developing, for people to be moving around or for ideas to be circulating. What is new - I am not talking about capital cities here - is that in recent years the scale and speed of this process have been astonishing, and it has even been getting faster, so that everything that makes our world, our society, our countries what they are is now affected.

If we look at the economy, businesses are in at the deep end, facing competition that is growing stronger by the day and that is forcing them and their staff to adapt. What this means for individual workers is that everything they have learnt to do, everything they have been doing for years, they are now having to change, do it differently, do it better, and, if necessary, do something else instead. So one of the challenges facing our countries and our institutions is that they need to be able, as far as possible, to anticipate, prevent and put right the problems which individual citizens encounter.

So much for the economy. If we look at information technologies, however, these have boomed in the space of just a few years, and the world is now united in having general access to information immediately, easily and free of charge, so that everyone practically anywhere in the world knows what is happening at any time in the rest of the world. This is a fundamental change, in my view.

As far as politicians are concerned, what this means is that the people they are responsible for are now always able to compare what is happening around them with what is happening elsewhere.

This is a good thing, but it is also a huge challenge for the politicians.

The economy, the information society and population movements have all gr

own and are still growing, causing some extremely difficult integration problems. But they are also offering host countries the chance to learn more about and be enriched by other countries' cultures and therefore to feel more at ease with globalisation.

Another aspect which is linked, of course, is what I regard as the second major challenge, the combination of climate change and the future of the world's energy. It now appears clear that we are in a process of global warming. Of course this is not the first time that the earth has undergone climate change, but it is probably the first time that it has happened so quickly.

A lot of people, a lot of scientists, say that we shouldn't worry about it - that the greenhouse gases that man is producing are tiny compared with the CO₂ and other gases naturally produced by the earth and absorbed by the earth, the forests, the sea, etc. There is a balance and it is more or less stable, or it has been. The only difference now is that the 'tiny' but rapidly growing amount that human activity is adding to the natural greenhouse effect is destroying the balance, because as we all know, if you have the same weight on both sides of a scales, it only takes an extra feather on one side to throw the whole thing out.

So we need to act, and act quickly, not just to reduce emissions, but also to adapt our production methods, our lifestyle, our homes, etc., now to cope with what the process of climate change is inevitably going to bring.

The link with our energy problems is obvious and is nothing new. Oil has been used as a weapon many times in the past, and our economy's dependence on fossil fuels now and for some time to come means that it could continue to be an attractive weapon for those with domination or confrontation in mind.

It is therefore important - and Europe is probably ahead of its partners in the rest of the world here - that we should have an energy policy that is aware, organised, long-term and effectively applied.

I have just mentioned Europe, and this is my third theme. I shall be very brief here, but I would just like to say that what strikes me - and I spent many years helping to build Europe, but that was 20 years ago - what strikes me today is just how complex people's feelings about Europe are. There is a feeling that the primary and most important aim of building Europe, which was to re-establish lasting peace and create the conditions for prosperity, has been achieved. But there are many other aims that are becoming necessary against the background of globalisation. It is clear that, compared with existing economies and powers like the USA and emerging economies like China, India and Brazil, and perhaps others, European countries individually do not have much weight, and it is therefore essential to act together. The public are aware of this, and at the same time they are not happy that the decision-making process seems too slow and that Europe's presence on the world stage seems too weak or too restricted in some ways. It is therefore the duty of us all to identify and map out the paths for future progress in building Europe, because individually none of our countries, even those which used to consider themselves (and sometimes still do) to be the greatest, can hope to influence world developments. We must all join together to contribute our history, our know-how, our experience and our culture to this process that is shaping the world of tomorrow.

Let me just say a final word about think-tanks. These clearly have a role to play in taking the lead here. Taking

the lead must, by definition, mean being out in front, showing the way, forging ahead, but not too far, otherwise the others lose sight of you. At the same time you have to be able to shake things up a little and make people move on. I think this is a very good programme for the three days we have ahead of us.