

## **Energising Europe**

### **Speech to the 30th Anniversary of the ELDR Congress**

**17th March 2006 Stuttgart**

**Graham Watson MEP**

In 1976 I was a student in Edinburgh. And the International officer of the Scottish Young Liberals, coaxing and cajoling colleagues to come to conferences like this.

The previous year we'd won the campaign to keep Britain in the European Community. Then, here in Stuttgart, we found common cause with our continental counterparts. We strove for success in Scotland in the first direct elections to the European Parliament, with our Leader Russell Johnston flying the flag. I was impressed even

then by the campaigning skills of our German Liberal friends -se evident here in Baden Wurttemberg today- when a group of Deutsche Jungdemokraten came over to Scotland to help. They helped us take 14% of the vote, but no seats; while our FDP friends did only half as well and returned 4 MEPs.

What a difference 30 years makes!! With

- five prime ministers
- seven EU Commissioners
- and 64 MEPs at the heart of the European Parliament
- and even a King, no less....

European Liberals, Democrats and Reformers are energising Europe like never before.

Not only do we swing the vote on issues of crucial importance

We put the demos back into democracy.

We've exposed backroom deals by Poettering and Schulz designed to put the brakes on free market reform.

We've flown the flag of transparency, and successfully challenged the Council on closed-door decision making.

And we've radicalised the reform agenda with a political programme that paves the way to European revival.

It's all a far cry from 1976. But Liberal campaigns were always ahead of their time. Indeed we are most feared not for the size of our political presence but for the strength of our ideas.

Three Liberal examples:

1. Gaston Thorn's idea that "Europe's economic problems are solvable only at a European level" was barely believed back then.

Now it is taken for granted.

2. Martin Bangemann told us as he left the Commission:  
"Ich gehe zwar, aber ich verschwinde nicht".

How right he was.

Martin always larger as life: and I see he still is.

His reincarnation, Liberal Commissioner Janez Potocnik, is fighting the very same battle for innovation as he did.

3. My third example is a little known Commissioner who told us that free trade in services is the way forward to renewed economic growth. He's rather better known today! Come back, Frits, all is forgiven!

30 years ago, in the introduction to his pamphlet "To be a Liberal" Russell Johnston quoted a constituent who had written to him stating: "I agree with most of what you say, and admire what you do, but I don't vote for you. I want to vote for someone who is a member of a Party which can win power .....the power to do things."

30 years ago ELDR took on this challenge.

Our numbers were small and our finances frail but we were resolute. We proved the doubters wrong again and again.

Today ELDR member parties form national governments in 10 of the 25 EU Member States - and in both of the new Accession Countries, Romania and Bulgaria.

Liberalism today is in the ascendant.

It has the power to do things, to change and to energise Europe.

But as Russell pointed out in his reply to that disgruntled voter, power is not sufficient in and of itself.

It has also to have a purpose. And for us, that purpose is clear.

In the Stuttgart declaration of 1976, we resolved to protect and promote people's rights and freedoms.

30 years later we have a European Charter of Fundamental Rights and a nascent Human Rights Agency in Vienna to keep watch lest those rights are undermined.

Back then we resolved to create a European polity underpinning a free society.

30 years on we have a European Parliament, whose powers are growing inexorably, a Council which meets regularly and a courageous Court of Justice.

30 years ago we promised a decent life to our citizens.

Now the European single market is an engine for growth, prosperity and opportunity for the future.

If we compare the demands of the Stuttgart declaration to the Union of today, we find - in the words of Guy Verhofstadt - "the most liberal Europe that has ever existed".

In the end of the Cold War, some saw the inevitable triumph of Liberal democracy.

The tragedy of 9-11 and the equally tragic response suggest they were wrong.

But they were right about one thing.

It is Liberal ideology which provides the tool-box for the break-downs of the modern world.

For Liberals recognise that the biggest challenges of the twenty-first century - challenges like population growth

and migration, climate change and internationally organised crime - can only be met by concerted action at European level.

So Europe needs the ELDR Party.

Unlike the right wing, we have no ideological difficulty with the development of supranational responses to the supranational challenges of our age.

And unlike the left, we know the only way to pay for our social policy is by embracing market forces, not protectionist instincts.

The EU needs a pro-European force at its centre that is liberal by instinct, democratic to the core and reform-minded by nature.

The ELDR brings these principles to the heart of the debate on the future of our common European Union project.

John Stuart Mill wrote of the intellectual superiority of Liberalism back in 1866 when he said in a letter to a Tory MP:

*"I never meant to say that the Conservatives are generally stupid. I meant to say that stupid people are generally Conservative. That is so obviously and universally admitted a principle that I hardly think any gentleman will deny it."*

But we must not rest on our laurels.

Nor forget that our programme is far from achieved.

To me, success lies in intertwining the three philosophical strands of Liberal thinking:

- classical liberalism, with its emphasis on the dignity and rights of the individual
- economic liberalism, with its belief that the free market is the most powerful tool in the race to eradicate poverty
- and social liberalism, which sees a role for government in the case of market failure, to make the world fairer for all its citizens. Annemie, tu as parlé de "générosité" : il faut la rétablir dans nos pensées.

That is why the group I lead in the European Parliament, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, has dedicated itself to a 10-point 'Programme for Europe'.

We strive

- to combine economic dynamism with social justice and environmental responsibility
- to enlarge, open up and democratise the European Union
- and to use Europe's status as a global strategic player to make globalisation work for all of humankind

***PLUG BOOK: LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND GLOBALISATION***

Some say: we have a European democracy but no European demos.

It's not true. We dress the same way, play the same games, enjoy the same music and feel the same revulsion at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.

But too often we define ourselves in relation to America – too rarely in our relations to each other. So the EU is seen as imposed from above and poorly explained.

The debate on the European Constitution shown us that. Merkel and De Villepin want to change its name. Not “Constitutional Treaty” but “Institutional Treaty”. They’ve heeded the words of Pat Cox when he said: “It’s not the text, it’s the context”

Liberals, Democrats and Reformers have much to do to convince our citizens of the need of wider, deeper integration. But we’re the only ones who can.

There is no 'deus ex machina' in Brussels. Europe is us: every one of us. We need to forge a common defence and security policy: a common policy for justice and freedom; and a Europe capable of promoting European values in the world. And we need to endow the EU with the tools and the resources to do this.

Under the able stewardship of Annemie Neyts, ELDR Members will need to energise policy and debate, continuing to speak out.

Radical where necessary.

Provocative where appropriate.

Honest in our words and our deeds.

For 30 years we have argued our case across the continent of Europe and beyond.

Sometimes for little reward or electoral gain, but always out of a strong conviction and with firm principle.

The seeds of our ideas and our toil are bearing fruit: we now boast parties of government and elected representatives at all levels.

As Russell Johnston put it many years ago;

*"The long slow dream we share is unfolding and the morning can be bright again"*