Strasbourg, 25 September 2002

Speech by Pat Cox at the Round Table "Democracy: Council of Europe experience and its meaning for the European Union", jointly organised by the International Institute for Democracy and Robert Schuman University.

Mr Chairman, dear Russell, thank you very much indeed for your kind words of introduction. I want to say, on behalf of the European Parliament, how pleased we are today to be able to host this meeting of the Institute and to underline to you again, through the working commitment of my own colleagues who are active in the International Institute for Democracy, the ongoing commitment which we have to this project.

You have remarked, Mr Chairman, that the idea itself belongs to a particular year, the year of the collapse of the Berlin Wall and to two particular parliamentary institutions, the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: in those terms a unique piece of cooperation. Our two bodies met jointly yesterday, extraordinarily for the first time. It really does seem extraordinary that it should have taken so long to have such a joint meeting. I think it is worth reflecting that this particular common exercise which brings us together again tonight, underpins the common public purpose we have in being a bridge from an older Europe, with such a complex past, to a newer Europe, based on common European values. Yesterday I felt, not only in the content but in the tone, - what we may call the emotional feeling of the meeting and not just the rational content of the meeting -, something important did happen. And something important was worth celebrating in terms of the common awareness of this idea of a Europe of common values.

I hope, calendar permitting, that we can take an initiative, perhaps even as soon as next year, to reflect on the work of the Convention on the Future of Europe.

The enlargement process of the European Union is, as we discussed yesterday, a way of copper-fastening additionally the kind of Europe of common values of which we spoke: pluralist democracy, respect for human rights and minority rights, the rule of law, the competitive social market economy, respect for cultural diversity, solidarity, sustainability - all of the things which are echoed through our institutional, constitutional and political order. But the enlargement of the EU has also brought other challenges. A major challenge is the economic reform and transformation of States already transforming from a long and dark era of fascism and communism to this additional requirement of adopting and being able to implement the acquis communautaire. I have had the privilege, firstly as the former leader of the Liberal Democrat Group in the Parliament, to have visited all candidate States of the Union several times and, as President, to visit ten of the twelve negotiating States since January of this year. It remains me still later this year to visit also the Parliaments of Rumania and Bulgaria. I've been enormously impressed by what I would call the transforming generation of the candidate States for European Union membership, the demands that life has placed upon them as a generation of
transformation and the extraordinary structural changes which they have been bringing about in their societies, economies and politics.

I look here at the paper just given to me, moments ago, about the Polish Sejm’s procedure for approximating Polish law to the law of the European Union. In recent years, especially from about 18 months ago, progress on this front has been dramatic and extraordinarily successful. They took a new consensual model within the Sejm and the Senate to be able to create that ability. I make the point about this political, social and economic transformation because I have a very strong personal opinion that there is in every process of transformation a given degree of elasticity: elasticity of ability to deliver by that generation of politicians and leaders charged with delivery; and elasticity of expectation by the public. I have come to the view that we are at the margins and limits of the degrees of elasticity that it is reasonable to expect, in European Union terms, on the part of candidate States. We all know the story, that accession States are tired of hearing since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, that enlargement is just five years away. Now, in December of this year, in Copenhagen, we will be touched by the hand of history to make a political decision, subject to the end-game negotiation between now and that moment. I believe, as I said, we are close to the limit of reasonable expectations in that margin of elasticity. Both in the public and in the political and public service élites, the desire to close out on the “contract of expectations” is there.

My final closing comment: Copenhagen in 1993 set out the top-down criteria for the classic ‘Europe of values’ which we have been driving towards. But indispensable also is the bottom-up process. That is where this Institute fits in. It is born out of the realisation that the top-down drive, in this moment of reconciliation, integration and transformation, is central but it is not exclusive. It requires all of the efforts from the bottom-up to connect civil society to this great project of reconciliation. For the European Parliament, I think I can say, subject to the fact that we still have to work our own way through all those agendas I mentioned, we are up for this. We want to see these things succeed. We want to make sure, if and when we do that and our deadlines are clear, our challenge is clear, we want to make sure that, along with our parliamentary colleagues in the Assembly of the Council of Europe, where those issues of values overlap, that we find a mechanism, to explore as parliamentarians. It is not just for governments, it is not just for jurists, it is also for us.