Strasbourg, 14 May 2003

Welcome address by Pat COX on the occasion of the visit of Mr Aleksander KWASNIEWSKI, President of Poland

I have great pleasure in welcoming today Mr Aleksander Kwasniewski, President of the Republic of Poland. Let me first express my satisfaction, that during the historic first plenary session with the participation of observers from the ten accession states we have the privilege to host the President of a country which has played a pivotal role in making the reunification of Europe possible. We also welcome a politician whose role has been essential in transforming his country and the entire region for the better.

Mr President, I am sure you are aware that today you are addressing a house, which is filled with friends. The European Parliament in its vote on 9 April gave a very clear signal, with over 90% voting yes, that we wish to see Poland as one of the member states of the Union. May I also recall that members of this house, in the 1980s, responded with solidarity towards the people of Poland when Martial Law was introduced in Poland by creating a group of Friends of Poland - Amici Poloniae. We are happy that we are now able to welcome 51 observers from the Polish Sejm and Senate.

We in the European Parliament are eager to welcome Poland and its citizens next year. The first of May 2004 will be the end of the long road that started in the shipyard of Gdansk in the middle of August 1980. We are conscious of how much our peaceful and prosperous Europe of today owes to Poland. Your glorious tradition to fight "for freedom, yours and ours", to defend the dignity and honour against the worst of oppression form a very important part of our common European identity. Westerplatte, Katyn, and two Warsaw uprisings are important pages in our common history.

Your compatriots, led by Lech Walesa, set the process of peaceful revolution in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in motion. I recall a famous poster from the streets of Prague in November 1989: Poland - 10 years, Hungary - 10 months, GDR - 10 weeks, Czechoslovakia - 10 days. Solidarnosc, encompassing intellectuals and factory workers, opened a new chapter for Europe. The round-table talks, where your role was crucial in achieving success, set the model for peaceful transformation, unprecedented in history.

We in the European Parliament hope that - by her membership in the European Union - Poland will contribute to building a Europe which will be more open, democratic and which will take advantage of the multiple meanings of the word "solidarity". You will bring to us an entrepreneurial spirit as well as a firm commitment to a Europe of values and a familiarity with your old neighbours to the East, who will become our new neighbours. You will also bring your attachment to freedom and deeply-rooted national pride. These values will not be lessened by membership of the European Union - on the contrary they will flourish and be of value for future generations of Europeans. Your distinguished compatriot Karol Wojtyła - His Holiness John Paul II - spoke in the Polish Sejm in 1999 about the contribution of Poland to the European Union. Let me recall his words: "Poland has a full right to take part in the process of progress and World development, especially European development. Integration
of Poland with the European Union has been since the beginning supported by the Holy See. The historic experience of Polish nation, its spiritual and cultural richness may effectively contribute to the good of the whole human family, especially to strengthening peace and security in Europe."

Mr President,

I would like to congratulate you on the leadership and commitment shown in the ongoing EU referendum campaign. I had the privilege and pleasure to participate in the launch of your campaign in Warsaw. I knew that you have already met, among others, with citizens of Plock, Torun, Gorzow and yesterday, despite the storm, Bialystok.

I am aware that your campaign will take you to many more places all over Poland. Your leadership in this decisive campaign is important for Poland, for the success of enlargement and for Europe. I am sure it will bring equally good results as your other important endeavours in the last years: to bring Poland and her neighbours into NATO, to bring Ukraine closer to Europe and to lay the foundations for a future European Union Eastern Policy.

Mr President,

Before I give you the floor, let me express on behalf of the European Parliament my sincere best wishes for the result of the referendum on the accession of Poland to the Union. We hope that Poles will take advantage of the opportunity that history gives them now and will return a resounding "TAK" on the day of the referendum.