

**Hon Margaret Wilson MP  
Speaker of the House of Representatives**

**Keynote address to conference**

**Europe in the Changing World  
challenges, priorities and research collaboration**

**Christchurch Club  
154 Worcester Street  
Christchurch**

**7.00pm, Friday 26 September, 2008**

May I first thank the National Centre for Research on Europe for the invitation to participate in this conference aptly named Europe in the Changing World: challenges, priorities and research collaboration.

May I also congratulate Martin and his team on the Annual Review of the Centre. I read it with interest and can see how established the work of the Centre has become in the academic life of New Zealand. I am sure the research conducted by the Centre will contribute to our knowledge of Europe, especially the enlarged Europe.

I have supported the work of the Centre since it was established and I was still working at the University of Waikato. I recall at the time when the information about the Centre first came to us that I thought this is exactly what was needed. It was needed I thought because we often take for granted our understanding and

knowledge of Europe and at that time had underestimated the importance of the influence of a united Europe in world affairs. I think there is now a greater understanding, especially since the countries of what we called Eastern Europe have joined the European Union, but we need an authoritative source of information and analysis and that is the Centre.

I also thought at the time and continue to think that we underestimate the influence of the history and culture of Europe on our identity and character. Much of the discussion in recent times has been on New Zealand as a Pacific nation or as being part of Asia. All of this is true and good, but it should never be forgotten that much of our institutions and culture has its roots in Europe also. Europe both looking forward and looking back is important to New Zealand.

It is useful to remind ourselves that the EU is New Zealand's second largest trading partner and that European countries make up 14 of our 50 top trading partners, with a combined total of around 16% of our merchandise trade. Also the 27 members of the EU account for 31% of the world's economic output and purchasing power. When you add in other European countries, and Russia, you are looking at over a third of the global economy.

We share a vision for a just, secure and sustainable world and are committed multi-lateralists and therefore cooperate closely on a broad range of international issues. A significant milestone in the New Zealand – EU partnership was the conclusion last September of our Joint Declaration on relations and cooperation. The

Declaration outlines the broad range of shared interests covered in our relationship with Europe, which highlighted that we need to engage with the EU on a whole-of-government basis.

As the Joint Declaration between the European Union and New Zealand points out, in today's increasingly volatile and complex international environment, the value of dialogue and the exchange of information cannot be underestimated. We welcome the existing twice-yearly bilateral Ministerial Troika consultations. Regular contacts take place between the President of the Commission, the European Union High Representative and the New Zealand Prime Minister – in addition to the regular dialogue between the New Zealand Parliament and the European Parliament. We expect these exchanges to continue on a regular basis.

Opportunities will be sought for further dialogue through bilateral visits at Ministerial and Commissioner level and in the margins of international meetings. This will be supplemented with a regular exchange of information missions and in other fora. High-level visits between New Zealand and European Union institutions, and EU member states, are an important anchor for the relationship. The New Zealand Prime Minister travels frequently to Brussels. The Minister of Foreign Affairs travels to Europe at least every six months for high-level consultations with the holders of the EU Presidency. Other Ministers also travel frequently to EU countries, the recent Speaker's delegations have gone to European countries, the annual exchanges between the New Zealand Parliament and the European Parliament, and the parliaments of

member states, establish and strengthen invaluable links between New Zealand and Europe. Parliamentary friendship groups on both sides also play a vital role in the relationship.

Our relationship with Europe goes beyond trade. It is important to recognise the cultural inheritance we in New Zealand have been gifted by Europe. The settlers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were drawn primarily from the United Kingdom and Ireland, but it is important not to forget the French influence was strong, especially through the Catholic missionaries, and the smaller communities who came from Scandinavia, Germany, Dalmatia, Netherlands, Switzerland and many other countries. As pioneers they possessed self-reliance and independence, and an openness to innovation and change that was essential to survival. We like to think that these characteristics have become part of our identity as New Zealanders.

For me one of the most important connections with Europe has been the commitment to democratic decision making. While New Zealand has one of the oldest Parliamentary democracies, it has benefited from democratic movements in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. I would argue that we still have much to learn from European constitutional movements as is seen from our MMP electoral system that owes much to the German system. It was for this reason I decided to lead three Speaker's Delegations to Europe.

I thought this evening I would concentrate on one aspect of our relationship with Europe that is rarely touched on and that is the

relationship between Parliaments. It is not well known that Parliament has 8 friendship groups with European Member Parliaments, including the European Parliament. A friendship group is the means by which Members of Parliament can express their individual interest and support for developing a relationship with Parliamentarians from that particular Parliament. They have nothing to do with the executive and are organised by the members themselves but with the support of the Speaker's Office.

They are essentially informal groups but there has been a recent tendency for some of them to be more active. This activity ranges from engaging with the various missions based in Wellington, to arranging exchanges, to hosting visiting delegations. Many European Parliaments also have New Zealand Friendship groups and I have noted an increased interest in the countries I have visited to form such a group. I have sought to encourage the groups because they enable Members to be better informed about other Parliaments and countries. As a small country at the bottom of the world we need to be constantly aware of what is happening elsewhere. To the credit of most Members I think as a Parliament we are outward looking and there is an understanding of the importance to engage with other Parliamentarians.

As I noted, I have led three cross-party delegations to Europe. The purpose of these has been to affirm the connection between our Parliament, and where there is a friendship group to meet and discuss issues of mutual interest, and where there is no group to seek to ensure one is established. An equally important reason

has been to study the electoral system and administration of the Parliament in the countries visited. The reason for this is simple.

Most European Parliaments have some form of MMP government and are of more interest to us in many ways than the Westminster Parliament. I have felt it is important Members of Parliament are familiar with these systems as it is inevitable that at some point we must adapt our form of MMP. For example, I believe a successful electorate Member should only bring other Members into Parliament if they reach the 5% threshold. The other reason I promoted the visits is because Europe is important to our economy and we need to press our case, especially with the recently admitted countries.

It is a matter of record that such delegations receive a bad press. I can only assume it results from residual travel envy by journalists or more accurately their editors. Someone should tell them travel broadens the mind, or maybe that is the problem! I would note that I have approved seven other overseas visits and approved numerous inbound visits from delegations. The New Zealand Parliament is a popular destination because of our Select Committee system and a reputation of innovation in a variety of policy areas.

I thought it may be of interest to relate what happens on these delegations. In 2006 we travelled to the European Parliament in Brussels, and then on to Turkey. We learnt about the operation of the European Parliament in the context of the campaign at the time for Turkey to join the European Union. We were in effect hosted by

the very strong and active friendship group that regularly visits the New Zealand Parliament. It quickly became clear that there was a sharp division of opinion within the Parliament on the admission of Turkey, which was the same amongst Turkish Parliamentarians when we visited their Parliament.

The visit was also useful for me because of the somewhat boring, but important issue of the administration of Parliament. I was embarking on a programme of major reform of our Parliament's entitlements for Members and found the European Parliament also had such issues but on a much larger scale. I am a firm believer that an efficient transparent administration of Parliament is essential for its credibility. There is not enough time to recite what else we learnt in both institutions but it confirmed for me that Turkey is an economy and a country that New Zealand cannot ignore and that there is a great deal of goodwill within its Parliament for New Zealand.

In 2007 the Delegation visited Germany, the Netherlands and Norway. The purpose was primarily to look at their MMP systems, in particular Germany which provided the model for our electoral system. The overwhelming impression from visiting these countries was the increasing demand from citizens to more direct forms of participation within the political system. We could also observe the visible tensions within the 'grand coalition' in Germany. It was a useful reminder that all coalitions come at a price and in Germany the price was that some issues were simply placed on the back burner as being just too hard. The observation was also made that the coalition had given political prominence to

the political extremes which given Germany's history was a concern raised by several people.

When it came to this year's Speaker's delegation, I confess my choice was largely driven by my interest in learning more about the new enlarged Europe and understanding the role played by Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. I rate this as a highly successful visit and given the recent events in Georgia gave us an insight into the issues facing those countries. More specifically we found a great deal of interest in New Zealand and reforms in the agricultural sector. Our visit had followed a large delegation from Poland to New Zealand and a Czech Delegation is here in New Zealand now.

We also noted that while there was an acceptance of the need for these countries to join the European Union to be able to move forward, there was also considerable scepticism about the long term benefits. The Treaty of Lisbon has provided the catalyst for this debate so I felt it was important to continue to watch the debate over ratification of the Treaty after the rejection by Ireland in the recent referendum.

There was also tremendous appreciation for the assistance New Zealand has extended to the citizens of those countries after World War 11, the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, and the 1968 Czech Uprising. As an aside – Peter Brown, a NZ First Member of the delegation, found he was in much demand the day we arrived in Hungary as the junior coalition partner withdrew, leaving Hungary with its first experience of a minority government.

Before I conclude I want to make a few general observations from the visits to Europe on what we learnt about the state of representative Parliaments. As I have said, one of primary purposes of the visits was to study electoral developments and the legislative and administrative processes of the various Parliaments we studied. We were also interested in the level of support for the Treaty of Lisbon and the constitutional union of Europe. While there was widespread support for the economic benefits of the union, with the usual caveats of too much regulation and bureaucracy, there was less enthusiasm for the political and constitutional arrangements. Our last visit was just before the Irish referendum and I had the impression that result may have been repeated in other countries, which maybe explains why in the countries we visited the Parliaments had the authority to make the decision.

This is not the occasion to examine this issue, as I am sure it has been covered during the conference. It was apparent however that there is a malaise infecting the various representative parliamentary democracies. Disappointing low turnouts at elections and an increasing cynicism about politics and governments generally were all repeated to us as concerns by commentators and politicians. An increasing demand for more participation in the decision making process was often heard. The gap between the governors and the governed has become too great and has led to alienation. Parliaments were seen as representing a professional elite and distant from the people they represent. While the individual Parliaments were being urged by

some to be more participatory, it was difficult for people to see the relevance of a European Parliament or constitution, which seemed even more remote and of less direct relevance to the lives of the citizens in the constituent countries.

I think this will be a challenge for us all – how to make our Parliaments not only more representative but more participatory. In New Zealand MMP has made our Parliament more representative but I doubt it is seen as more participative. There needs to be a serious re-engagement with the democratic project otherwise we are in danger of losing it. I know there is literature around this issue that explores ways in which to revive citizens' interest and participation so I shall not pursue the question here. I raise it however to demonstrate the value of increased contact between New Zealand and the European Union. We share a democratic tradition that is in the process of a necessary evolution so we have much to learn from each other.

I feel I have exhausted my time for an after dinner speech. I do appreciate the time you have given me however because it enabled me to provide some assurance that Parliament takes our relationship with the European Union very seriously. New Zealand has a good international image which is in part attributed to the numerous face to face contacts between Members of Parliament and their counterparts in other countries. We take our international obligations seriously and this attracts many overseas Parliaments to visit to learn about our form of democratic government. All this can only be positive for our future.

**I am not sure if there is time for questions but if there is I am happy to answer them.**