Do North America and Europe share a common culture?
Atlantic Youth Forum 2004

May I say how delighted I am to be invited to this year's Atlantic Youth Forum. Looking at the programme for the next five days, you will be tackling some of the critical issues that we face regardless of which side of the Atlantic we come from. And I hope that, in addressing the issue of the extent to which we share a common culture, I can help you by setting the scene for some of the discussions which lie ahead.

It is now more than a century since Oscar Wilde, an Irishman who lived in England, but who was no stranger to the shores of the United States, said:

“We really have everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, the language.”

If it was true at the end of the 19th century that we had everything in common – except for the way we use language – how much more so is that at the start of the 21st?

It may seem to be little more than a statement of the blindingly obvious to say that the US and Europe share a common culture. Since Oscar Wilde's day, the North Atlantic has been reduced, both metaphorically and in practical terms, to little more than a pond.

On any given day, you can catch no fewer than 30 direct flights from London to New York. Assuming each plane is carrying an average of 400 people – that’s 12,000 passengers flying in each direction between those two cities alone. Add the multiplicity of flights from, say, Paris, Frankfurt, Rome and Madrid to other hubs such as Washington, Chicago and Miami, and you soon build up a picture of hundreds of thousands of Americans and Europeans crossing the pond and visiting each other’s countries at any one time.

In Europe, we are avid consumers of American popular culture, regardless of whether or not our first language is English. We lap up The Simpsons, Frasier, Will and Grace, and Star Trek - much as earlier generations were glued to I Love Lucy and The Waltons. Hollywood stars are international stars, be they American, Australian, Welsh, or – as in the case of California’s governor - Austrian in origin.

US films fill our screens: even the BBC World’s Talking Movies programme is unashamedly broadcast from Broadway in New York and rarely carries any reference to British or European films.
American brand names are at the centre of globalised brands. Teenagers in Manchester, England, are as likely to consume a MacDonald’s burger as their counterparts in Manchester, New Hampshire. We shop in Gap or Banana Republic, whether in Regent Street or on Fifth Avenue. We do, of course, diverge in terms of sport: baseball and American football remain, for the most part, a mystery to most Europeans, whose passion for football itself is shared, in the Americas, only from Mexico southwards. And I know Americans remain baffled by cricket and how a game can last 5 days.

All these, are, of course, examples of global cultural influences, and today we would be hard pushed to say they were exclusively a product of a common culture between Europe and the United States. Such a bridge would have to span the many different cultures which actually constitute Europe and the United States.

For the roots of that common culture, we really have to go further back to the 17th and 18th centuries.

When the Pilgrim Fathers left Plymouth for the ‘New World’, as for any other European pioneers, be they French, Spanish, Dutch or Portuguese, their journey was nowhere near as certain as that undertaken by today’s travellers.

Like any migrants, they arrived in the Americas with mixed motives. Some were religious dissidents, setting out to establish New Jerusalems with names such as Providence, New Haven or Salem. Some were more secular in their purpose; other New England place names such as Alewife and Martha’s Vineyard suggest many arrived with a less Puritanical approach to life. A number sought economic fortunes – those who did so in tobacco or other staple crops, often achieved this by directly infringing any right to liberty of those they forced to help them, through the institution of slavery. Others, such as the victims of land clearances in Ireland and the Scottish Highlands, left Europe unwillingly. Yet others, from areas such as Normandy and Brittany, sought to establish a New France which stretched from today’s Quebec through the Great Lakes as far as Minnesota.

The contradiction of slavery notwithstanding, the theme of liberty was, of course, central to the revolution undertaken by the 13 colonies. The Founding Fathers viewed themselves as upholding the ancient liberties set out in the Magna Carta of 1215 against the tyranny of Kings. Few were emphatically in favour of direct democracy – most, as gentlemen farmers, preferred the relative safety of indirect representation to representative democracy.

But these concepts of liberty were not exclusive to either the English or to the other US colonists. Much of the philosophical basis of their thinking stemmed from the 18th Century Enlightenment, whose key thinkers resided in Edinburgh and Paris. The first country to recognise the fledging US Republic was France - where Thomas Jefferson was the first US ambassador.

The 19th Century saw a considerable drifting apart of the cultures and societies of Europe and America. The US turned its back on Europe, turning itself into a frontier society which claimed a Manifest Destiny. Thus it mixed Millenarian ideals with the possibility of wealth and fortune for migrants from Europe. New France was forced into isolation by the victory of General Wolfe on the Heights of Abraham high above the St Lawrence. By the 1820s, the control of Spain and Portugal over their American possessions was at an end.
Economically, the 19th Century was a time of divergence between the two continents. While the US did not have the Industrial Revolution, it did have the scope for economic expansion. It could square the circle that 19th Century Europe could not: unlimited space could satisfy the homesteading needs of the aspirant poor while not disturbing the wealth and privilege of the rich. Only in the south, with its reliance on slavery for the cash crops of cotton and tobacco, was this economy and political theory unsustainable - resulting in the inevitable Civil War of the 1860s.

For generations of Europeans - the huddled masses - the US became a beacon of liberty, welcoming waves of migrant poor from countries such as Italy, Ireland, Poland, and Russia - until quota systems in the late 1920s ended this one-way route out of European overpopulation and poverty.

Europe’s last great wave of influence over the United States came at the time of the Second World War. The forced exodus of the continent’s intellectuals, writers and artists in the face of German fascism and Stalin’s totalitarianism in the 1930s and early 1940s fuelled and shaped much of the Modernist structure of the arts and, indeed, sciences of the United States today. The centre of the art world moved irrevocably from Paris to New York. Chicago became the spiritual centre of international architecture. Though countries such as the United Kingdom continued to produce large numbers of award-winning scientists, the US was the most successful country in building the critical mass necessary for British inventions such as computers and the Internet, or discoveries such as DNA to be taken forward in any really meaningful way.

In cultural terms, Americans were highly successful at exploiting new discoveries and in exporting their cinema and literature to the outside world. Writers such as F Scott FitzGerald and John Steinbeck, evoking the excesses of the 20s and the Depression of the 30s, held universal appeal to Europeans. US cinema served up a heady brew of gangster movies and Westerns which Europe could not match. African-Americans provided the other great creative stream of American society, its distinctive jazz age.

Sigmund Freud failed to move his couch from Vienna to the US: but if Woody Allen is anything to go by, it is arguable that his influence has been much stronger on the US than on Hampstead, his wartime home in north London.

There is little doubt of the influences which the United States and Europe have exerted on each other over the past three or four centuries. But it would be a mistake for us to leap from that to believing that culture-in-common is the same thing as a common culture, exclusive to these two continents, but which somehow excludes those from elsewhere or is immune to other influences.

To suggest that the United States and Europe have between them an exclusive common culture would, in my view, be a great mistake.

For a start, if there are great similarities and influences washing back and forth in both directions, there are also great differences. The US, for example, has built its society on an ideal, a particular vision of liberty which, in part encourages, even if it does not deliver, a homogeneity implied by the idea of E Pluribus Unum – out of many, one.
In Europe, the history of competing nationalisms from the 19th Century, which caused the turmoil of both the First and Second World War conflicts, has faded only gradually. While the European project seeks to unite those differences under an overarching economic structure, it does not seek to homogenise them. Europe is a patchwork of languages, legal and political systems, ethnicities and nationalities trying to live in peace, with a degree of economic - but not cultural - integration.

Not for Europe the ideal of an American dream. More modestly, if we can achieve relative harmony – as we have over the past 60 years – and if the prosperity of western Europe can be brought to the countries previously behind the Iron Curtain, we will be relatively satisfied.

In this respect, Canada shares more of a European tradition – respecting the collective rights of the founding French and English-speaking nations, and certainly not seeking to achieve a monolingual, uniform state.

The second objection to the idea of a totally shared common culture comes from our ignorance of each other. There are substantially different aspects to our two societies. The lack of a frontier spirit is one I have mentioned already. In Europe, the two strong traditions of Christian Democracy and Social Democracy have entrenched ideas of welfare capitalism much more strongly than in the US – with collective health care available to all, and “safety net” welfare available to a broader range of people than in the United States.

It is also quite evident that there are substantial differences in our mutual understanding.

We found evidence of this recently when the British Council surveyed young high-achieving American students, many of them from Hispanic, Asian-American and African-American backgrounds - who will become the leaders of 21st Century America. Our aim was to identify their perceptions of the UK. We called the research Pale People in the Rain – a view held about the British by a student from sun-drenched southern California. The results threw up important and interesting findings for other European countries too.

The students we talked to had no little or no understanding of the ethnic diversity of the United Kingdom.

What we found was a very traditional view of the UK, which does not fit with today’s reality. The students thought we were "snobby people" steeped in tradition, a "tea and crumpets" society.

They thought the Scots wore kilts and the Irish were at war. They were unable to name the four countries that compose the United Kingdom. And there was much doubt over who captained the England football team. A focus group suggested that David Beckham might be a baseball star, a golfer or a hockey player. And after his last (failed) penalty for England in Euro 2004 there are those who might think it would have been better if he had been!

We asked the students where they thought it would be best to study abroad. They concluded that Britain would be best for literature and history, politics and international relations. For the arts and design they suggested France and for computer studies, Japan.
My purpose in stating this is not to say that they got it wrong: it is to say that when US students are asked about other countries, they tend to come up with stereotypes rather than reflections of contemporary realities.

So when we say that we share a "common culture" I think we have to be careful. The US, as it heads beyond the 300 million mark in terms of population, has become such a large cultural society within itself, and so dominant in global terms, that it is not perhaps surprising that other cultures, which are less prominent, no longer feature on the radar.

Sadly, we do not have any similar studies assessing in-depth what European youngsters think of American society. I suspect that if we did, there would be admiration for the energy of US popular culture, tinged with concern about the role of the US internationally.

If we have established that we have a culture, or cultures, in common, it is true also that we tend to see these cultures from very different perspectives.

Equally, we should recognise that these cultures are not exclusive to our two continents. Rather we should see the world's cultures as a series of concentric and overlapping circles – within which we share and draw upon other influences.

In Europe, these concentric and overlapping circles involve interaction with the Arab and Muslim worlds. The influence of Arab and Muslim cultures in Europe has a long history. In Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, for example, a doctor establishes his credentials by recalling the great names of medical science: six from the Greek and Roman worlds and three from the medieval Islamic World.

Islamic scholarship formed the all important bridge between ancient Greek and Roman disciplines - such as philosophy, mathematics, astronomy and navigation - and the European Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries. Islamic centres of learning such as Toledo, Granada, Cairo and Baghdad, effectively formed part of a golden thread of knowledge form the classics to modernity by providing that crucial missing link in Europe's dark ages.

It is no coincidence that, since the 14th Century, Portugal and Spain have produced such great navigators. Arabic navigation skills, honed my nocturnal caravans traversing the deserts of North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, formed a critical part of the body of knowledge of the great navigational schools such as Sagres and Cadis in the Iberian Peninsula, whose efforts to find new routes to the east resulted in Columbus discovering the Americas.

Other circles of influence for Europeans are the connections that have been made over the centuries, if not millennia, through trade with India and further east with China, Korea, Indonesia and Japan through the silk road and the spice routes.

For today's United States, the concentric and overlapping circles of cultural influence and exchange include the North-South connection with Latin America and the Trans Pacific connection which links the western seaboard with the growing economies of East Asia. The increase in the use of Hispanic languages and the watching of satellite TV by ethnic groups allows its citizens and politicians access to a transnational community, different from both national and international relations.
There are, of course, those who would encourage us to believe in a “clash of civilisations” of which the dreadful deed of 9/11 and the subsequent actions of Al Queada and its followers are viewed as the latest manifestations. Samuel Huntington claims there is a 1300 year old fault-line between western and Islamic civilisations. Yet for every example of conflict there are many more that involve exchange and inter-cultural influence. It seems no more fruitful a line of argument than Professor’s Huntington’s latest theory in which he claims to have detected a clash between Anglo-Saxon North America on the one hand and Hispanic America on the other – something which he had emphatically denied only a decade before.

To sum up, I can do little better than to echo the words of a great British student of American Studies of the 20th Century, Marcus Cunliffe.

Broadly speaking, he asserts, America and Europe have kept step over the centuries. Differences have been one of degree. The amount of divergence is a subtle affair. Yet for a European there is an unsettling feeling about our relations with the States. Cunliffe sees America as a country, or group of countries, which largely grew out of those of Europe – yet it is still a foreign country. There are odd overlappings and abrupt unfamiliarity: kinship yields to a sudden disjointure, as when we hail a person across the street, only to discover from his blank response that we have mistaken a stranger for a friend.

We need to recognise much more the complexities of our societies. No other ex-European colony has been so heterogeneously populated or so long politically independent of Europe as the United States. No other country whose origins lie in Europe has had so sharp an awareness of its cleavage from, and superiority to, the parent cultures.

Cunliffe argues that running through American history and its literature is a double consciousness of old world modes and new world possibilities. Yesterday has been dismissed and pined for: tomorrow has been invoked and dreaded.

The Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, summed up this dichotomy in another way: America, he wrote, “is the future of Europe’s past”.

When we have a better understanding of America’s hopes and fears for the future and America has a better understanding of Europe’s relationship to its past, we may be closer to a much better understanding of each other. Whether the UK, as part of Europe, has a special role to play in improving this understanding is something I am sure you will debate during your conference.

Ends