Speech given at Labour and Conservative Party Conference Fringe events, September 2008, by Sharon Memis, Director USA

Transatlantic Bridge? Britain, Europe and the post-Bush Era

I feel immensely privileged to find myself working in the United States during one of the most exciting and important elections in American history. But I’m not going to talk about the election or speculate about who might win. The British Council is non-political and, as the UK’s cultural relations organisation, we take a much longer view. Our focus is people to people, not Government to Government, so, I want to talk about how contemporary American society is changing and how that is affecting America’s relationship with the UK and the rest of Europe.

We have seen in the past few years undoubted shifts in certain aspects of the relationship between the peoples of the United States and those of the UK and the rest of Europe. I am arguing that some of the underlying reasons for these shifts are long-term and will continue, whoever wins on 4 November.

Almost every week, a new survey is published which highlights the differences between Europe and the United States. But lamenting
differences is not our business. The British Council is interested in connecting people by finding common ground. So, earlier this year the British Council commissioned some rather different research. We wanted to find out what Americans and Europeans think about each other, what they think about the transatlantic relationship, and, we wanted to identify the issues on which we might build consensus into the future. The results were very revealing.

- A surprising 91% of the Americans polled wanted closer ties with Europe.
- Although a majority of Europeans in the seven countries surveyed expressed a desire for a closer relationship with the US, some, it has to be said, were more ambivalent than others.
- The other interesting result was the almost unanimous agreement on the most important global challenges: top of the list was the environment. But a majority felt that transatlantic cooperation was not very effective in the areas that really mattered to them; for example, only 19% thought cooperation in tackling climate change was effective.

This shows that while there is clearly a strong interest in closer co-operation there is also a sense that not enough of it is happening to build effective long term relationships across the Atlantic. If we believe that the transatlantic relationship matters for the UK, we cannot take the relationship for granted; we need to continually invest in new connections because both the United States and Europe are changing.
Take a look at the demographics of the United States. Minorities, including new communities from Latin America and Asia, now make up one third of the US population. And the latest US census predicts that by 2050 minorities will account for just over half of the US population. The census also predicts that by 2023, in just 15 years, 'more than half of all children will come from minorities'. This means that for many millions of Americans, the UK and Europe will simply not be part of their frame of reference. This is a very different United States from the one many Europeans are familiar with.

The UK and the rest of Europe are changing too. Significant sections of their populations feel increasingly uncomfortable about America’s role in the world - particularly post 9/11 and Iraq - even if the relationship between our political elites looks healthy. The current crop of European leaders - in Germany, France, the UK and elsewhere - are the most Atlanticist in a generation. In the US, both Obama and McCain have talked about the importance of the transatlantic relationship. But high level political relationships, while important, are not enough because, younger Americans are looking less and less towards Europe and Europeans are increasingly prone to knee-jerk anti-Americanism.

And this is not just about demographics. It's about values too. There have been negative and condescending remarks in the media about the Republican vice-presidential nominee, Sarah Palin. But Palin is, in many ways, the embodiment of 'small-town' American values. And to understand the United States, we need to understand and respect the values she represents, whether we
agree with them or not. The reality is Americans have far stronger religious beliefs than do Europeans. Four in every five Americans attend church. Nineteen out of every twenty Americans believe in God. Growing numbers of them are Christian fundamentalists in the true sense of that word. And it is estimated that 47% of Americans reject Darwin’s theory of evolution in favour of creationism or intelligent design.

Values matter because although we might agree on what the global challenges are, our values frame the solutions we propose. This can lead to a divergence of opinion on how to deal with international issues. This is not a short –term development which will disappear once George W Bush leaves office. It’s here to stay, whoever is in the White House. .

But whilst I firmly believe that more unites than divides us, there is no room for complacency. In the past, the assumption perhaps has been that our two societies are so similar that there is no need to invest greatly in actively developing and promoting contacts. Now we must recognise that the landscape is changing. We need to nurture that relationship by encouraging and stepping up educational and cultural exchanges that will have an impact over many years to come.

This is not to say that there have not been important investments in the relationship. The Rhodes and Marshall scholarships like the Kennedy and Fulbright scholarships are evidence of this, as are the continuing efforts of the British Council and other organisations
to increase the numbers of US students at UK universities and vice versa.

At the moment, the UK is top foreign destination for US students and UK students reciprocate by making the USA their favourite choice. But again we mustn’t be complacent. China in particular is becoming increasingly popular as a place for young Americans to study. There are now more and more American students whose families don’t have their roots in the UK and Europe and consequently have less motivation to go there to study. They need active encouragement to do so.

We at the British Council are addressing these challenges with a new initiative. It’s called Transatlantic Network 2020. Its object is to tackle the growing gap posed by the divergent world views between the US, the UK and the rest of Europe. And it aims to support the emerging generations on both sides who will be the opinion formers and leaders of the future – bringing them together and enabling them to develop shared solutions.

Building up this long-term ‘cultural relations capital’ is essential, not only amongst the ‘classical elites’ but also amongst the wider population and new demographic groups on both sides of the Atlantic. To achieve this, we need to think long-term; not in periods of four or even eight years. We need to imagine the world in 2020 and beyond. We must not forget history but we do need to invest in the future.
So Transatlantic Network 2020 is our contribution towards forging new links between the changing societies on both sides of the Atlantic.

But will Transatlantic Network 2020 make a difference? We think so. It has to be hugely valuable to connect young leaders across the Atlantic who would not otherwise be in contact. The participants range from an LAPD cop focused on gang violence prevention, to the executive director of a libertarian think tank to the youngest member of the Welsh Assembly, all talented young leaders whose paths would not normally cross, but who will benefit from knowing and learning from each other over the years. It’s about investing for the future, creating fresh ‘cultural relations capital’ to underpin the relationship between our two continents for the future.

This is a programme for the long-term, longer certainly than the tenure in political office of leaders on either side. Whatever political or demographic changes may take place, the relationship between the UK, Europe and the USA will remain enormously important; and we cannot be complacent about it.