

## Education Department

### *Higher Education and Research*



#### **Speech by Terry Davis, Secretary General of the Council of Europe at the Forum on the Responsibility of Higher Education for a Democratic Culture**

Strasbourg, 22 June 2006

Democracy is a concept created by humans for humans and it has all the strengths and weaknesses associated with other human projects. It is a progressive and fair form of government, but it does not have the resilience and the infallibility of the laws of nature. Democracy does not simply happen. We must want democracy, and we must work to have democracy. If we fail in our will or effort, we only have ourselves to blame. In the words of George Bernard Shaw, democracy is a device which ensures that we shall be governed no better than we deserve.

Democracy is an attitude - not a law. It does not require legislation to give it substance, but it needs laws for protection, coherence and effect. I have always said that democracy is much more than an electoral code, and I note with regret that my view is too often confirmed through flawed elections based on perfect rules.

Democracy is about equal participation and accountability. Both require knowledge and information. If people are unable to make informed decisions, someone else will make these decisions for them.

Today, one of the biggest challenges to democratic institutions is the growing disinterest and disillusion of voters. In most cases, it is not because people lack the will to participate, but because they do not have the adequate skills and information to participate meaningfully. They become virtually disenfranchised.

In a world which is changing at an ever faster pace, this lack of information has become a clear and imminent threat to the regular functioning of our political institutions. A large proportion of voters are lost to abstention and an even larger proportion is exposed to populist manipulation. If people are not given skills and information to deal with complex issues, they will perceive them as a threat and will simply embrace simplistic messages catering to their frustrations, prejudice and fear.

One of the most important ways to counter this phenomenon is through education for democratic citizenship, hence this Forum which takes up the priorities set by the Council of Europe member states at their Third Summit last year. The Action Plan adopted by the Heads of State and Government included the issues of democratic citizenship and democratic culture, intercultural dialogue and intercultural understanding.

Education is paramount to change in society and plays a primary role in defending and extending sustainable democratic societies. Democratic culture must be renewed and developed by every successive generation.

If we want our democracies to work, we need individuals whose personality and mindset, whose knowledge, competences and skills, whose attitudes towards each other, towards society as a whole and towards knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge allow and empower them to act democratically.

Higher education institutions are strategic for the sustainable democratic development of our societies. They fulfil a multiple role in developing knowledge and competence for individuals and for the benefit of society as a whole. They provide the most important and potentially the most effective opportunity to prepare people for a life of active participation in democratic processes at all levels, by offering education for democratic citizenship, human rights, intercultural dialogue and tolerance.

A value-based approach to higher education is especially important because of the growing tendency to perceive education as a private investment yielding a private return in the form of a better financial and social position. It goes without saying that in the Council of Europe, we have broader views about these matters, and that we are working hard to make these views a reality through debate and policy-making with our member states.

Exchange is also critically important. The ultimate gauge of success of the European Higher Education Area is the extent to which it enables students, staff and graduates to move freely throughout Europe and communicate and engage with the rest of the world.

I am therefore especially pleased to welcome to Strasbourg so many prominent representatives from higher education institutions, public authorities, policy experts, student associations and others from many different countries. I also have the special pleasure of welcoming many colleagues from the United States of America, both as Secretary General of the Council of Europe and as a former postgraduate student in that country.

The Council of Europe is and will remain a European body, but our fundamental values are universal and our problems are increasingly global. We act European, but we think worldwide -and we are always open to discuss and work together on issues which require cooperation beyond national and regional borders. Higher education and its role in education for democratic citizenship and democratic culture is certainly one of these issues.

At the beginning of my speech I said that democracy does not follow the laws of nature. Perhaps, to some extent, it does. Unless it is nurtured, it will wilt and die. But if dawn always succeeds the night, and the sun breaks up the clouds, democracy is not predestined and automatic. It must be wanted. It must be worked for. And it must be educated for. But unlike sunshine which comes and goes, democracy can be made to stay. And this is what the Council of Europe is about.