

The future of the European project

Position paper (November 2001)

The European Union can be proud of the developments of the last half century and the achievements which it can boast today: relationships between the States founded on lasting peace, relationships between citizens founded on freedom, a large internal market in which the barriers to trade have fallen one after another, the birth of a new currency setting the seal upon the single market, and finally the defeat of communism and the emergence of open societies in central and eastern Europe. This provides a basis on which Europe should have cause to view the future with confidence.

However, the past few years have seen the question of its future and the problem of its governance being repeatedly raised. In particular, faced by the major challenge of enlargement, the Union is questioning its own capacity to cope, and becoming increasingly aware that its institutions are inappropriate both for the effective management of an enlarged Europe of at least twenty five Member States, and for spreading its message and ideals to five hundred million European citizens.

The triumvirate of Council, Commission and Parliament is in need of major adjustments. The Council, wherein the right of veto too often causes paralysis, draws up in secrecy political compromises that are difficult to explain to public opinion because they lack clarity and sometimes coherence. The once ambitious Commission takes refuge in excessive caution and is experiencing a crisis of confidence within its own departments. The European Parliament, isolated and lacking public visibility, is seeking the means of raising the profile of its actions and establishing its place in the democratic process.

Yet European leaders have so far failed to reach agreement on a proper and consistent reform of the institutions. The Nice Summit, even though it took a number of necessary steps toward enlargement, soon came to be seen as a missed opportunity, and as a denial of the Community spirit in favour of the sole preservation of national interests. The disappointment which greeted its results can be seen in the discontent of European citizens with regard to the current state of the European project, which discontent even led to the rejection of the Nice Treaty in the Republic of Ireland by a majority of voters taking part in the referendum.

This diagnosis and reality have come to full light since the beginning of the 11th September crisis, which has destabilised world equilibrium. Europe has not been capable of speaking through a single voice, and the Heads of State or government went in scattered order to Washington and to third countries to present or justify their response to the terrorist actions. Cooperation in the field of justice, of extradition, and of the detection of transfers of criminal funds, is obviously leaking. Policies on foreign affairs, joint defense and transport, in particular concerning aid packages to airline companies, have demonstrated their inadequacies and shortcomings. Health policy, after being tested during the BSE crisis, risks breaking down tomorrow in the face of new dangers.

The new crisis that is shaking the world has brought to light certain facts:

- ◇ a return to the political rather than the economic on the scale of priorities;
- ◇ the need to rethink globalisation in the light of recent disorders;
- ◇ the verification that the role of the State is essential. Facing world challenges, decision centres ultimately remain governmental, in spite of the place taken by new players such as multinational companies;

- ◇ at the same time, confirmation that the system of juxtaposed or intergovernmental national sovereignty has reached its limits and shown its inability, and that the need for a strong and united Europe is greater than ever.

This revealing state of the European project is perhaps a reflection of a deeper unease, which appears at a time when, in addition to the major challenge of strengthening Europe's capacity to confront terrorism, other important issues have come to the fore: the final replacement of national currencies by the euro, enlargement and how it should be financed, the management of migratory flows, the place of Europe in the world and the upholding of its interests, and the survival of a European social model in a globalised economy.

During this crucial time for the future of European unification, ELEC cannot remain silent. Since 1946 its founders and their successors have never ceased to work for an integrated, open, efficient and generous, Europe. Today it wishes to draw the attention of governments and political leaders to the grave risks inherent in a continuation of the current paralysis. The absence of a rallying project and of the means to achieve it could soon prejudice the *acquis communautaire* and complete the demotivation of the general public, a majority of who are still in favour of strengthening integration between Member States. ELEC is now highlighting the urgent need for an in-depth reflection that leads to clear answers to the basic questions: what sort of Europe? to do what? with what political architecture?

ELEC has welcomed with interest the suggestions which have been put forward from various quarters, particularly the German Chancellor's proposals for creating a genuine European executive within which the Commission would remain a driving force. It also welcomes the Belgian Presidency's priorities, among others enlargement, political structure and the functioning of an enlarged Europe. ELEC views as particularly important and constructive the "Wake-up call to Europe" recently made by thirteen leading European personalities who observe that "the Union has run out of steam and is in search of an identity because it no longer has any joint political project before it", and who propose remedies such as "strong democratic and effective institutions, based on the dual legitimacy of being member states and having federal-style institutions that can handle matters of common interest".

It is not ELEC's place to recommend precise institutional solutions for today's problems and dilemmas. Nevertheless, in an enlarged Europe, the economic cooperation for which ELEC has always stood should more than ever be founded on the following principles:

- ◇ the construction of an irreversible union between the countries that make it up;
- ◇ the search for, and recognition of, supra-national European interests in certain areas, over-riding mere arbitration between possibly diverging national interests;
- ◇ the existence of institutions which are able to identify these supra-national interests and win their acceptance, carrying sufficient legitimacy to be able to rely on the support of the general public;
- ◇ subsidiarity, which, in the many areas where it will continue to apply, should depend upon the transparent and efficient exercise of national or local political powers, which respect democracy and the fundamental freedoms of European citizens;
- ◇ greater participation by citizens through a reform of the current structures and methods of representation.
