

'On the threshold of a Europe of Ten' from L'Europe en formation

Caption: In its issue of July and August 1971, the federalist journal L'Europe en formation looks critically at the operation of the Common Market and reproaches the European Communities for being too abstract in the eyes of European citizens.

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On the threshold of a Europe of the Ten

Enlargement of the European Community created in the wake of Robert Schuman's May 1950 declaration is now a probability. Some people welcome this development without sufficiently appreciating that, given the conditions under which it is to take place, it has been made possible at the cost of the gradual abandonment of the very rules that have enabled the Community to achieve its successes over the years and of the consequent abandonment of age-old prejudices on the part of the British.

But the fact is that, for over 20 years, the ceaseless rearguard action of mutually contradictory statist-nationalist forces against each advance towards federalism has forced us to stumble blindly from crisis to crisis. It took only a few years for governments to realise that the ECSC would perish unless it rapidly became the embryo of a general common market. But those valuable years were lost nonetheless, and they were all the more valuable because of the greater openness to European ideas in 1950, especially in Germany. The EEC had been in operation for 10 years before governments understood that it had failed to achieve the goals of the Treaty of Rome in terms of common economic policies; that, in the final analysis, the Common Market was no more than an improved customs union; and that, in order to preserve its fragile institutional cohesion, it was necessary at last to embark on the difficult journey towards economic and monetary union.

When, under the pressure of repeated international monetary crises, the governments decided to take the plunge, they nevertheless balked at establishing the vital regulatory machinery. Another storm last May paralysed the project at the outset, so that, today, we cannot see when and how it is to be successfully implemented or under what conditions a serious start could be made, if the unanimous consent of six — soon to be ten — Finance Ministers is required at every step. It has also taken a good 10 years to understand that a common agricultural policy cannot be confined to the integration of markets and price lists but must also, and above all, be a structural policy with profound social and regional repercussions. We are still waiting to hear how such a policy can be reconciled with stubborn adherence to national practices and to disparate funding centres and methods.

It took even longer for Britain and other countries to see the light and resign themselves to abandoning their traditional free-trade systems for Community methods. Yet, just as the Community is at last opening the door to newcomers, the rules of the customs union are being twisted in all directions again. As the EEC grants more and more exceptions, its external tariff is coming to resemble a patchwork quilt, without any serious strengthening of the Community's institutional machinery and still without any common European trade policy vis-à-vis the Communist bloc.

Quite the reverse! London and Paris openly proclaim that each state must keep control of its decision-making processes as long as possible, while the other Community partners avoid the issue and bury their heads in the sand.

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To our knowledge, Jean Boissonnat, Editor-in-Chief of a leading French economic review, is one of the rare journalists in recent times to have expressed in appropriate language the awkwardness of this situation and the distress and dissatisfaction that it is causing to all who want Europe to be something more than just a bargaining shop. This is his assessment: 'The customs union can no longer be considered as the fundamental defining feature of the European Community. In reality, the arrival of the British dispels an illusion; even without them, the Customs Union did not suffice to define a community. Now we are suddenly confronted with the real issues: a common economic policy, monetary union, a social project, a third-world policy, common defence and dedicated institutions. The unanimity rule, for example, which was already difficult to apply with six Member States, will be impossible to apply with ten when major decisions are to be taken. That means that there is every likelihood that they will not be taken. There are two ways to shed our illusion: either [...] we admit that the European adventure has been nothing but a long detour on the road to the restoration of free trade throughout the world; or we affirm that Europe has something to say at the end of the 20th century and that the customs union was merely the first step towards political unity.'

Forgive us this lengthy quotation, but — coming from a commentator who, as far as we know, does not belong to federalist circles — it is a perfect illustration of our fears and arguments. It only remains to add that the myth of political unity itself ceases to be credible and capable of generating support when it is no longer coupled with a specific project going beyond the supranationalisation of structures to the federalisation of European society. Political unity alone, especially if it means unity among states, is of little interest to the peoples of Europe. As most often presented, it appears above all to be the superstructure of a Europe of businessmen, Eurocrats and computers, a necessity that is too abstract and distant for the man in the street.

On the contrary, the political sovereignty of Europe in the world of nation states in which we live would make sense if it enabled us to assert new cultural and social dimensions. But that is precisely the sort of Europe our governments, despite their denials, want to reject. Worse still, they stubbornly refuse to involve the peoples of Europe directly in its establishment. It is symptomatic that the first time that Europeans will be able to vote directly for or against the Community will be in countries on the periphery of Europe, in Denmark and Norway, which will be holding referendums. The provisions of the Treaty of Rome concerning direct elections to the European Parliament are far from perfect, but the governments' main concern since 1958 has been to ignore them. Political contests continue to take place in the closed universe of national societies. Key economic interests may well have been supranationalised, or at least shifted to a level other than that of the nation states, but the machinery of democratic control remains purely national. The widening gap between politics and economics is the underlying cause of the continual crises to which the European Community is subject. Politics is lagging behind. In other words, it remains imprisoned in the pre-Community situation. It is still the prerogative of the Committee of Permanent Representatives of the Member States in Brussels, which, on a day when there was presumably a whiff of rebellion in the air, a distinguished European jokingly referred to as the 'committee of mothers-in-law'. If we add to these distortions the situation created by strict observance of the unanimity rule in defiance of the provisions of the treaties, it is reasonable to assume that, upon enlargement, it will become increasingly difficult to govern the Community as it should be governed and to turn it swiftly into a firmly-based reality, while the factors of internal dislocation will operate to the full under the strain of opposing forces.

Perhaps this was inevitable, given the failure to impose a genuine constituent process after the war, when sovereign states were still shaky. The paradox is that Europeans are called upon to dominate their era and overcome the constant challenges of piecemeal Community integration — still unfinished after nearly a generation — in the midst of such contradictions, ambiguities, and crises caused by their own blindness. But something very different is needed for the European idea to become attractive: a doctrine of action quite distinct from the traditional ideologies of the statist-nationalist left and right, which have been handed down from a century when the Western nation-states and bourgeoisie were at the height of their power and foolishness. Time have changed, but the men of today (as used to be said of General de Gaulle) too often continue to look at the future like drivers staring into their rear-view mirrors at the road that they have already travelled. Only brutal facts occasionally force them out of their routines. Making the idea of Europe attractive perhaps means first of all taking up the challenge and tirelessly proposing multinational principles for a genuine federalist democracy; it also means adopting a distinct approach in day-to-day action, denouncing counterfeits and unmasking pretence.