

‘The point of meetings between the three giants of the EU’ from the Europe Daily Bulletin (23 January 2004)

Caption: In his editorial dated 13 May 2003, Ferdinando Riccardi, Editor-in-Chief of the Europe Daily Bulletin, sees no drawbacks to meetings between groups of Member States of the European Union, such as those between the ‘three giants’, provided that it does not affect the smooth functioning of the Community method.

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The point of meetings between the three giants of the EU

by *Ferdinando Riccardi*

The ultimate weapon against a board of directors. What is the point, to Europe, of meetings between the "three giants" of the EU, who have announced a new Summit for next month? The right answer seems obvious to me: to fight to strengthen the "Community method" against a forcible return to the intergovernmental method. To criticise meetings between groups of Member States or try to oppose them would be a nonsense. Bilateral or trilateral meetings have always existed and always will; it can even be claimed that they often have positive effects. Who would pass judgement on the Benelux countries' efforts to co-ordinate their positions in Community bodies? It's when they don't agree that problems arise. And how can it be disputed that Franco-German co-ordination has played a sometimes decisive role to spur others on at difficult times, or that the United Kingdom can help to thaw Euro-American relations? Tony Blair once said that it is not in opposing European progress that one's influence on it will grow, but by taking part in all Europe's groundwork. So let him join in, and let's hope his public opinion follows!

We all know what the small and medium-sized countries fear from co-ordination between the big ones: that they will get together to form a kind of board of directors, making decisions the others have no option but to bow to. I am not pretending to be naïve, denying that the "big boys" ever intend these meetings to show the road to be travelled, and sometimes even taking decisions in advance which the Community institutions will enshrine later. This is also more or less how certain British ministerial sources presented the affair, explaining that with the enlargement of the Union, Franco-German leadership is no longer realistic, and that the UK will have to join in if it is to remain effective. But the official positions of the governments in question are less categorical (or less honest?): no government is hankering after leadership, co-ordination is open to all, and in any case, it's all grist to the Community mill.

If the Community method works... So we're back to the fundamental point; if the Community method works, there can be no real danger of a board of directors. If the Commission is strong and independent, it holds all the cards, with its exclusive right of initiative, its powers of management, its role as guardian of the Treaty, the rule whereby Council requires unanimity to defeat one of its proposals. Even in these troubled times, the Commission's weight is obvious: whatever your view of it, its appeal to the Court of Justice against the Ecofin Council is just the last episode of a constant reality. And with Parliament's help, only the Commission can reverse the tendency to reduce the Community budget. The second main element in the Community method is the European Parliament's increasing power of co-decision, a pledge for open and democratic debate. The third element guarding against domination by the Giants is the new Council voting procedure proposed by the Convention, which will prevent the most populous Member States from forcing decisions through in the absence of agreement on the part of most smaller ones (the rule of "double majority", the oft misunderstood guarantee for smaller countries). However, in an intergovernmental context, no government will be able effectively to controvert the will of the "three giants".

The conclusion is clear: the small and medium-sized Member States lose their effectiveness, their influence and their autonomy when the Commission's powers are weakened and the Community method diminished.

Those who have misunderstood. A few governments have grasped it, principally Belgium, which has never hesitated to say that it feels that a strong Commission is more important than the presence of a Belgian national within it. A fine thing it would be to have a Belgian Commissioner in a talking shop of a Commission! Several Member States seem not to have understood the importance and significance of the Community method. Others have criticised the three-way meetings just to carp about not being part of them; invite them along, and then everyone will be happy.

At the end of the day, these three-way meetings are the best argument there is for defending the Community method, the Commission's autonomy and preserving its competencies, and increasing the European Parliament's powers. Those which don't understand this, and try to rub shoulders with some or other of the Giants in the hope of getting into their good books, are kidding themselves. Just as long as they don't complain when Europe has boiled down to simple co-operation between States, of the kind which has

dominated for centuries, with results we know all about, because it will be too late.

(F.R.)