

Address given by Joschka Fischer to the Bundestag (28 November 2000)

Caption: On 28 November 2000, Joschka Fischer, German Foreign Minister, delivers a speech to the Bundestag in which he emphasises the implications of the imminent Nice European Council.

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Joschka Fischer, Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, on the Nice Summit of the European Council — Address given to the Bundestag on 28 November 2000

European unification as a historic mission

Mr President, Honourable Members, in Nice we are poised to take one of those momentous steps forward which will lead us to an integrated, enlarged Europe. We are being called upon to take an important first step at Nice by deciding that the European nations, the European peoples, by joining forces, will be largely able to determine their own destiny in the 21st century within a framework of multilateral structures. Even the largest of the European nation states — France, Germany, Britain and Italy — will be too small to meet the impending challenges alone.

If we do not join forces, this Europe will stagnate and regress into its old self-imposed captivity, into the sorts of problems and conflicts that have dogged Europe in the past. This is precisely the challenge that confronts us. All of the previous speakers have emphasised that the unification of Europe is the historic mission facing us, which we must now achieve. If we see it this way, however, we must think the whole thing through, without any aspect being deemed taboo, and then, as the Federal Chancellor outlined very precisely in his speech today, we must think through the issues of enlargement and deeper union, and this will lead us to the conclusion that Nice must represent a major step forward.

I must say to Mr Merz, however, that I should have welcomed a mention on his part of the fact that in Nice we shall have to tidy up the ‘leftovers’, the problems that were not resolved in Amsterdam when his party was in government. Since I am referring to the honourable Leader of the Opposition, let me add that I wondered what induced Mr Merz, of all people, to call for passion. Fancy the honourable gentleman making such a demand!

You, Mr Merz, have set the tone. I am happy to follow suit. It sometimes grieves me a little that I have to restrict myself to objective interventions in debates. Now you have presented me with an opportunity to play you at your own game, and I intend to do so, at least for the next five minutes.

What are the accusations that you are levelling against the Federal Chancellor? You accuse him of a lack of passion, then you accuse him of silence on the BSE issue before finally coming round to talking about the guiding culture, the *leitkultur*.

I have only one thing to say on this *leitkultur* debate. Name me one other people, one other nation in the European Union or among the applicants for accession, which feels so unsure of itself that it needs to conduct a debate about its guiding culture. Ask any French person, any Belgian, any Dutch national, any Italian, Pole or Czech! I tell you, it is not the Germans who suffer from this particular malady but the democratic German Right, which is finding it hard to define its own identity within a converging Europe in this post-Cold War era. Be that as it may, I do believe that this debate should be conducted in all seriousness. But it is not the question of how we identify ourselves that makes me think of DUCKSBURG and MICKEY MOUSE but rather the way in which you talk about the issue, Mr Merz. That, for me, is the crucial difference. If what we heard today was the guiding culture, I can only say that the future looks bleak for our Opposition and its policy on Europe.

[...]

I take your silence on all the substantive issues as consent, because you essentially offer no alternative to the line set out by the Federal Chancellor. I am familiar with your positions: I know the Schäuble line, the Pflüger line, the Lamers line, the Hintze line; I know the positions taken by all your other speakers on European affairs. They all basically adopt the same stance.

But then I have to ask you whether your speech has strengthened or weakened the position of the Federal Government in these difficult negotiations in which, among other things, national interests have been at stake. By contrast, we who were in opposition at the time of the Amsterdam Summit supported — and I personally supported — all the key elements of your line on Europe, despite all the criticism, of which I am very well aware, that was made of Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s position after Amsterdam.

We had no interest in undermining the position of the Federal Government in such difficult negotiations. Afterwards too, even in cases where the outcome fell short of expectations, we were moderate in our criticism. After the Amsterdam meeting, did we use the ‘leftovers’ — the complex issues that remained unresolved — as the basis for sweeping criticism of the Government’s approach? No! When it came to the difficult decision on the President of the ECB — and every one of us knows what happened there, particularly with regard to relations between Germany and France — did we voice the sort of criticism that you have been making today? Let me tell you that you have not strengthened the position of the Federal Government in the interest of Germany ahead of these important negotiations, as I should have wished; instead, you have tried to weaken it. I find that painfully embarrassing.

The Nice agenda

We are indeed faced in Nice with a quite fundamental and important step. I do not subscribe to the view that no fruitful work has been done during the French Presidency and that the foundations have not been laid for a successful outcome to what will be very difficult negotiations in Nice — difficult because in an expanding European Union one of the main issues is to strike an equitable balance between large and small Member States.

There can be no doubt that a great deal is at stake, since this is all about the weighting of votes, the number of Commissioners and majority decision-making. These are matters of crucial importance. Then, of course, there is the question whether we intend to proceed towards a European constitution. Adoption of the Charter of Fundamental Rights will also be on the agenda. We want to see the Charter incorporated into the Treaties. It also goes without saying that we wish to make substantial progress on the European security and defence policy. The important thing, however, is to take the decisions in this domain which can actually be taken. I hope that all these wishes will be fulfilled.

Weighting of votes

Unlike my honourable colleague Mr Merz, I should like to return to the problem of the weighting of votes. It is a fact that the problem of relative size has existed between the French Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany since the inception of the European Union. This problem was resolved by a political decision. The problem exists in numerical terms. It was resolved politically through the enshrinement of the equal ranking of both countries.

Even before reunification there was a numerical disparity between the old Federal Republic of Germany and France. That much, of course, is patently obvious. But the gap was further widened by reunification. This, however, is not the crux of the matter. For France, the preservation of equality in spite of the difference in population sizes is an absolutely vital political issue. It is one of the most important points.

On the other hand, as the discussions in Biarritz and thereafter have clearly demonstrated, we must find a principle that applies to the entire Union. As the Federal Chancellor has emphasised on several occasions, if it were only a problem between Germany and France, it would be resolved within a very short time, because we are well aware of the importance of Germany’s relations with the French Republic.

What we have to find in Nice is a genuine solution to this problem. We cannot contemplate a situation in which the accession of numerous smaller states upsets the proportionality of the weighting of votes — in other words, the value assigned to each Member State’s vote in qualified majority voting — to the extent that it undoubtedly will do unless we adopt a new weighting system. Now, I do realise that we have the full support of the Opposition on this point. I am trying, as you will see, to tease out your support on the issues on which you have been eloquently silent.

A strong Commission

On the question of the Commission, you expressed yourself rather more clearly and supported the proposal.

Honesty demands, however, that we face up to the unfortunate fact that the smaller Member States have come out clearly against the rotation principle. I use the term ‘unfortunate’, but in a debate like this we have to call a spade a spade. I am gratified that you support this more extensive proposal. I do believe that a compromise can be found here too. As the Federal Chancellor emphatically stated a short time ago, we want a strong Commission.

So the Opposition wants one too — another point of consensus! I should also like a stronger Opposition, which would generate a bit more pressure.

In our view, a strong Commission means that the number of Commissioners cannot be increased *ad infinitum*, which would only create meaningless portfolios. This in turn would impair the effectiveness of the Commission. This being the case, there will be opportunities to arrive at a compromise if this mechanism is actually enshrined in the Treaties rather than being put back into the pot as a new ‘leftover’ for some other day.

Qualified majority voting

The next point concerns the extension of qualified majority voting. Mr Merz, on this issue we heard you citing the example of trade policy in an accusatory tremolo. Since you mentioned relations between Germany and France, let me say that we are indeed prepared to envisage some very radical steps in the field of trade policy, but the French Republic finds these extremely hard to accept.

Be that as it may, we cannot simply ask with inquisitorial conviction whether our partner is prepared to take these steps just because we are. At the moment, it looks as though France would give a high priority to the issue of trade policy. There are some other questions — those of tax policy and asylum law as well as a few other concerns raised by smaller Member States — which will be the subject of tough negotiations, because national interests have left a chasm here that has not yet been bridged by the prospect of a compromise. None the less, I believe that we can achieve a substantive result on this issue, resolving most of the problems and, I hope, going on from there to develop mechanisms that will settle the issue once and for all, mechanisms that would be enshrined in the Treaties. But this will be very difficult, because diverse national interests need to be reconciled.

Enhanced cooperation

With regard to enhanced cooperation, I take the silence of the Opposition as unequivocal consent and as tacit praise too. Mr Merz, your remarks were so stimulating that we on the government benches felt inspired to accompany them with our own comments. You really ought to be delighted by that.

You do more than perhaps anyone else to provoke discussions on the government benches. As you delivered that emotionally charged speech, I was struck by the relative lack of emotion within your own ranks, but let us not go into that any further.

The reason why enhanced cooperation is so important — and let me reiterate at this point what I said at the start of my speech — is that the historic challenge of uniting Europe entails the need for more deeply rooted integration. As the Federal Chancellor said, it is our wish that the entire Union should take the next step towards political integration on the basis of these Treaties, if at all possible. If this is not possible, however, those who are willing and able to move forward should not be prevented from doing so. In this respect, the Federal Republic of Germany, this Government, has a gratifying groundbreaking achievement to its credit, because something that would have been regarded as impossible only a year ago has, since Biarritz, stood a realistic chance of securing majority support, namely enhanced cooperation, the proposals on which stem largely from a German–Italian initiative.

Charter of Fundamental Rights, European security and defence policy, strengthening the European Parliament

Other aims of the Nice Summit are to strengthen the European Parliament, to take a decision putting into effect the finalised structures of the European security and defence policy and to adopt the Charter of Fundamental Rights as well as holding out the prospect of further action in the conclusions.

None of this has anything to do with procrastination. Every path is taken one step at a time. Some steps are strategically important, when the path forks in two directions. Nice is one of those crucial steps. This does not mean, however, that success in Nice will lead us straight to the destination of political integration. You should not impute to the Federal Chancellor a desire to defer any decisions. I can only tell you this: we consider it essential that there should be no 'leftovers' on the table after Nice. We consider it essential that the conclusions pave the way for the next steps, which can then be developed under the Swedish, Belgian and subsequent presidencies. In his outlook for 2004 — we shall need that much time — the Federal Chancellor has described what this means in very practical terms.

Enlargement

As for enlargement, I believe that we should do well to use Helsinki as our guide. I can only emphasise what the Chancellor said, namely that Sweden in particular will have to tackle this issue very energetically during its Presidency if the results of Nice are to bear lasting fruit. The Commission's progress report is a good basis for the continuation of the process. There must be no decisions based on political convenience and no politically motivated decisions designed to block progress. These, in our view, are absolutely essential precepts.

On the basis of the outcome of the Helsinki talks, let me emphasise that we are speaking about the reunification of Europe, and great importance attaches to Poland in this context. The Second World War began with the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany, to which the United Kingdom and the French Republic responded by declaring war on Germany. Poland suffered military defeat but never laid down its arms and kept fighting for freedom. After 1945, the Yalta system put Poland on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain, but still it did not lay down its arms. The same applies to other nations, but Poland's role in the modern history of Europe has been crucial. When we talk about this eastward enlargement, we are not referring to just one round of enlargement in a series but rather about the very core of the reunification of Europe after a division that our country caused by its descent into the crimes of the Nazi regime. This is another reason why we have a special obligation to champion the cause of enlargement. Let us not forget that the first brick was actually knocked out of the wall by the Polish trade-union movement *Solidarność* in the late 1970s.

I know that there is a broad consensus on enlargement. I seriously want to underline the significance of this step. It is of paramount importance to us that the reunification of Europe should follow on from that of Germany. I can invoke Helmut Kohl in support of this call, and there is no reason why we should not acknowledge this truly significant part of his legacy in a debate on Europe. That, by the way, is something else that I should have hoped to hear from you.

Since there is a close link between the reunification of Germany and the reunification of Europe, we feel duty-bound to make every effort together with our Polish friends, on the basis of Helsinki, to enable Poland to create the conditions — the economic, empirical and legal conditions — that will make it one of the first new members when the Union is enlarged over the next few years.

Thank you.