The political implications of European Union enlargement

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The process of European Union enlargement began in the late 1990s. Accession negotiations with the 12 applicant countries opened in 1998 and were scheduled to be completed, for those countries ready to accede, by the end of 2002. The financial perspective for 2000–2006 included aid both in the pre-accession phase and after accession from 2002 onwards. Questions remained, however, about how the new Member States would be represented in the institutions (the number of votes in the Council and the number of Commissioners, Members of the European Parliament and representatives on the consultative committees that they would have). These issues had been resolved without too much difficulty on the occasion of the previous enlargements, but, this time, a dozen new countries were expected to accede, taking the number of Member States from 15 to 27. It was a major quantitative and qualitative change, one which required institutional reform if the risk of paralysis was to be avoided and enlargement made to work for the continent of Europe as a whole. The implications were, therefore, considerable.

The Treaty of Amsterdam — signed on 2 October 1997 and designed to adapt the provisions of the Maastricht Treaty on European Union — failed, however, to include the necessary reforms, because of disputes among the Member States, and the best that the Treaty could deliver was a protocol postponing resolution of the issues until the accessions were under way. Hence the declaration by Belgium, France and Italy, annexed to the Treaty, asserting that 'reinforcement [of the institutions] is an indispensable condition for the conclusion of the first accession negotiations'. The European Parliament backed that position, and fresh intergovernmental negotiations therefore became necessary.

The Cologne European Council (3–4 June 1999) decided that an intergovernmental conference (IGC) would be convened in early 2000 and should conclude its work by the end of that year. The IGC would have a remit to consider the three issues left open in Amsterdam: the size and composition of the European Commission, the weighting of votes in the Council and the introduction of the dual majority system to extend qualified majority voting. There was also scope for addressing related issues concerning the other institutions, particularly the European Parliament. The Helsinki European Council (10–11 December 1999) confirmed that agenda and decided that other matters could also be included in the report that the Portuguese Council Presidency would draw up during the first half of 2000: the Feira European Council (19–20 June 2000) was therefore able to add to the issues left open in Amsterdam the problem of closer forms of cooperation, which had been provided for by the Amsterdam Treaty under conditions so restrictive that the provision remained a dead letter. Before convening the IGC, the Council was required to consult the Commission and Parliament, which delivered their opinions on 26 January and 3 February 2000 respectively. Both institutions, however, went on to adopt various positions throughout the course of the Conference, which opened on 14 February in Brussels and lasted all year under the successive six-month presidencies of Portugal and France.

The debate about Europe's future was actually too big to handle in the limited framework of a conference concerned with adapting the numbers involved in the EU's existing structures. Political unification and the establishment of genuine political authority were the issues that needed to be addressed. The situation with regard to the single currency highlighted the problem: the euro had been adopted and was being managed by the European Central Bank (ECB), but there was no corresponding European authority responsible for economic policy.

The need for a comprehensive approach became obvious when the Portuguese Presidency took the initiative of convening a Special European Council in Lisbon (22–24 March) in order to adopt a strategic goal for the new decade, as set out in its blueprint on 'Employment, economic reform and social cohesion: establishing a European area of research and innovation'. The aim was to make the Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, one capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. This was to be achieved by developing 'an information society for all' through liberalisation of telecommunications markets and development of the Internet and electronic commerce. The strategy also included better coordination of broad economic policy guidelines and employment guidelines. It set an annual growth target of 3 % for the euro zone. The Council had no difficulty in approving the 'Lisbon Strategy', but progress with its implementation remained very limited because, from 2001, as growth began to slow and unemployment started rising, governments were no longer in a position to assume the financial burden that the ‘knowledge-based economy’ demanded.

In the political arena, European integration became a focus of public debate. Movement towards a form of federalism was advocated by, for example, former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, former French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and Jacques Delors, former President of the European Commission, who proposed what they called a ‘federation of nation states’ — a formula that sought to reconcile federal authority with national integrity. On 12 May 2000, the German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer submitted an official proposal during a speech at Berlin’s Humboldt University. His plan was subsequently approved by Chancellor Schröder, despite the latter’s much less ‘European’ profile. Fischer made the case for a federal-type structure (with a President elected by universal suffrage and a two-chamber Parliament) that would nonetheless allocate responsibilities in a way that reflected Europe’s plurality of nations. Under this plan, certain Member States which so wished could form a ‘central core’, to be joined by other states, notably new members, at a later stage. The German initiative was positively received across much of Europe, but it failed to win the backing of the (much less federally minded) French Government. President Chirac’s response came in a speech to the Bundestag on 27 June: he accepted the idea of a Franco-German ‘pioneer group’, open to other countries, as a means of providing impetus, but he rejected any suggestion of a ‘superstate’, proposing instead the joint exercise of certain aspects of national sovereignty.

At all events, the French Presidency was anxious that the IGC should succeed. It was therefore concerned that the opening of a wide-ranging debate about the nature of the European Union might have the effect of entrenching different viewpoints or even triggering a crisis and delaying enlargement. The Presidency therefore confined its ambitions to adaptation of the Treaty on European Union. This would proceed without any over-arching perspective on European integration, even though such a perspective might have helped to transcend the acute differences among national interests and the inevitable haggling and compromising.

It was clear, above all, that growing differences between France and Germany meant that they could no longer function jointly as the engine of European integration. The reunified Germany had shed its inhibitions: its priority was enlargement of the Union to encompass its eastern neighbours, thereby consolidating its central position in Europe. Germany had less need of France, whereas France believed that its own global policies and nuclear capability (the latter albeit less essential since the end of the Cold War) enabled it to continue in a leading role. A chill descended on President Chirac’s relations with Chancellor Kohl (they disagreed in May 1998 about the Presidency of the European Central Bank) and then with his successor, Gerhard Schröder (the sticking point here came in February 1999 over European spending on agriculture: the Chancellor wanted cuts in order to reduce Germany’s contribution to the Community budget, while the French President was intent on maintaining the *status quo*). Apart from the two countries’ shared wish to see majority voting in the Council extended, the main outcome of the Franco-German summit in Vittel (on 10 November 2000) was to confirm that they disagreed about the weighting of votes and a mechanism for reflecting population size, and about the number of Commissioners — France, on the one hand, seeking a reduction on the grounds of efficiency and Germany, on the other, ready to accept a big Commission, provided it was offset by increased powers for the European Parliament, something which France opposed.

With regard to the enlargement of the European Union, Germany accepted the French view that this was not the right time to discuss it but insisted that the European Council should take a decision on the subsequent opening of negotiations.

With France and Germany disunited, the other major countries could give no real lead. The UK, which had lobbied hard for enlargement, opposed the deepening of the Union and the strengthening of its structures as well as any extension of qualified majority voting. It also rejected the idea of forming a core or ‘fast track’ group of states — an entity which the Germans and Italians envisaged as tightly integrated, while the French preferred an intergovernmental model. Spain, for its part, was chiefly concerned to graduate to the status of a leading European power, an ambition shared by Poland. Meanwhile the small and medium-sized states feared that the larger countries could turn into a ‘directorate’: this was a particular worry for the applicant countries, which had been consulted prior to the IGC and wanted genuine reinforcement of Community institutions, as advocated by Parliament and the Commission.

Ultimately, the French Council Presidency was weakened by the fact that France had a right-wing President and a left-wing Prime Minister. Since the President and the Prime Minister of the Republic had different priorities, they could not agree on a real strategy. Lionel Jospin's special concerns were the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the social agenda, whereas Jacques Chirac focused on institutional problems. President Chirac led the negotiations with a determination to see them through to a successful conclusion and an authority that some regarded as arrogant and geared more to defending French interests than to seeking an overall satisfactory solution. When the IGC failed to produce such a solution, it fell to the European Council to cobble together a compromise, at short notice and amid widespread irritation.