

## 'A convention to invent the future of Europe' from Le Figaro (14 December 2001)

**Caption:** On 14 December 2001, to mark the Laeken European Council, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro focuses on the implications of the debates on the future of Europe and on the reform of the Community institutions.

**Source:** Le Figaro. 14.12.2001. Paris: Le Figaro. "Une convention pour inventer l'avenir de l'Europe", auteur:P.B; Ph. G.

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## A convention to invent the future of Europe

It should be simple: Europe convenes a representative forum and instructs it to deliberate on its future and the forthcoming reform of its institutions. But nothing can be taken as read where fifteen countries have a say: the 'Laeken Declaration', which is to be adopted by the Heads of State and Government on Saturday, will be the virtuoso performance of the eponymous Summit.

The European Union has compelling reasons to embark on this exercise: its frequently deplored 'democratic deficit', the prospect of enlargement to include ten or twelve new countries in 2004, the failure of the Fifteen to reach agreement in Nice a year ago. But the 'Convention' which will emerge from Laeken gives rise to as many questions as expectations. It proceeds from a desire for transparency which, for some Member States, is acceptable only if it is carefully circumscribed: its composition, its terms of reference, its timetable and, of course, the choice of its Chairman will, therefore, be hotly debated.

A draft declaration was submitted to the Fifteen by the Belgian Presidency in late November. The Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt, has recently visited all the capitals in order to 'see, hear and feel the reactions' of his opposite numbers. Though well received in Germany, Spain and the Benelux countries, his plan did not arouse enthusiasm among the Scandinavians, British and French. They criticise it for promoting, even in the form of a question, a vision of Europe which is too federalist. The Swede, Göran Persson, speaks of a working document, one of his opposite numbers warns of 'the risk of a clash'.

The Belgian proposal is split into three parts. The first sketches out a balance of the achievements of and insufficiencies in the European integration process: at the request of London and Paris, the self-criticism would be softened in order not to play into the hands of the Eurosceptics, particularly with a view to the elections in France.

The second part lists a series of questions focusing on four lines of action, defined in Nice, in order to broaden the scope thereof: the distribution of competencies between Brussels and the Member States, legislative simplification, democratisation and the possibility of making progress towards a European Constitution. Here, reactions are more immediate. The French, in particular, find that some formulations are too slanted towards a pre-defined response, inviting moves to strengthen the Commission or to transform the Convention into a 'constitutional assembly', for example.

The Presidency promised to adopt a more neutral tone, indeed to remove certain topics from its final version. It has only today been forwarded to the delegations, but it will be debated this evening, at the dinner, and tomorrow by the Heads of State or Government. The stakes are high, because this list will serve as a road map for the procedures of the Convention.

Its working methods are referred to in the final part of the document. In conformity with the model which, last year, resulted in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Convention would consist of 62 members — representing the Member States, the European Parliament, the national parliaments and the Commission — supplemented by external 'observers', including representatives of the applicant countries. It would deliberate from March 2002 to June 2003, with a 'pause' prior to the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) which will determine the action to be taken on its proposals. The result of the process, a new treaty for the 27-Member State Union, should be finalised before the European elections in the spring of 2004.

The real debate centres on the powers of the Convention: the Belgian plan speaks of 'recommendations', but the most reluctant hope that they will be limited to imagining 'options' for the future, leaving the widest possible scope for decision-making by the governments. Guy Braibant, who had taken part in the work on the Charter, objects: 'when the door is opened to options, it never ends.' The condition for success, he says, is 'being obliged to reach a consensus on a single text'. But the IGC does not want to be in any way bound by the product of an 'open' reflection process.

Another parameter relates to the person chosen to conduct the debates. Leaving aside national susceptibilities, the choice of Chairman will provide an indication of the expectations of the capitals. Given

the prospect of it being former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, supported by Paris, or former Council President Giuliano Amato from Italy, supported by Rome, other candidates have declared themselves, such as former Commission President Jacques Delors, or have been tipped, such as current Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok.

The Laeken Declaration will 'present a broad outline for the future of Europe', says Romano Prodi. That is precisely why the task is so difficult, especially if the aim is to have 'a strong, synthesising text supported by everyone', stresses the Commission President. The essentials are 'plenty of stamina, amplitude and a strong backbone', a Minister also comments.

No doubt there will be no escape from shopkeepers' quarrels, with governments demonstrating their reluctance to delegate some of their political prerogatives. Will that turn into a shoplifting spree? 'Two weeks away from the introduction of the euro, the Fifteen will be concerned to show an effective Europe,' a diplomat ventures. 'I do not expect lengthy bargaining sessions, and failure seems to be out of the question.'

## **PB and PG**