

Address given by Tony Blair on the work of the European Convention (28 November 2002)

Caption: On 28 November 2002, Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, emphasises the importance of the work of the European Convention on the Future of Europe and outlines his views on the role of the United Kingdom in a stronger and more democratic Europe.

Source: Speech of the Prime Minister Tony Blair. [ON-LINE]. [Cardiff]: European Commission, [29.04.2005].

Available on http://europa.eu.int/constitution/futurum/documents/speech/sp281102_en.pdf.

Copyright: (c) European Union, 1995-2013

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/address_given_by_tony_blair_on_the_work_of_the_european_convention_28_november_2002-en-c8e73a30-5b3d-4117-bb0a-3f1263d95ac2.html

Publication date: 19/09/2013

Address given by the Prime Minister Tony Blair (Cardiff, 28 November 2002)

THE CHALLENGE

Europe is set for dramatic change.

Together, the expansion of NATO, settled last week in Prague, and the enlargement of the European Union, to which next month's European Council at Copenhagen will give the green light, amount to no less than the creation of a new Europe. Stretching from Lapland in the north to Malta in the south, from the coast of County Kerry in the West to the Black Sea, and ultimately - yes - to Turkey's borders in the East, it will contain over 500 million people, a political and economic entity bigger than the USA and Japan put together. This achievement is truly historic - the more so because it is coming about peacefully and democratically. The New Europe is being created by free will - not conquest; spreading equality and justice - not domination and exploitation. We will see few more significant events in our lifetimes.

It was Winston Churchill who famously warned that the Iron Curtain was descending across Europe. He died without seeing the fully liberated Europe for which he had fought, nor the new unity in Europe for which he called in that famous speech in Fulton, Missouri. Partly because we failed to achieve the full victory for liberation and democracy for which we had hoped in the Second World War - and because of the part we played during the dark years of the Cold War - Britain has always held a special interest in completing Churchill's unfinished business. Europe's half century of artificial division is now almost over. As we remove the final traces of the Iron Curtain, we can take pride in the part Britain has played to secure this goal, as part of both NATO and the EU. It was NATO that won the Cold War, but it is the EU that will deliver the dividends of this victory for generations to come.

It has been a long and painful wait, especially for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, but the EU's enlargement will soon benefit all of Europe, new members and present ones. A recent study estimated that it could increase GDP in Britain by £1.75 billion a year. We will also be safer and more secure through better co-operation on border controls, asylum and immigration, joint efforts to tackle cross-border crime, and shared environmental standards. Enlargement will extend Europe's area of peace, democracy and prosperity. But it also means reforms to the way Europe works - reforms which have been put off for many years - are now urgent.

That is the task of the Convention on the Future of Europe, led by former French President Valéry Giscard D'Estaing. As Europe enters this new era, fifty years after its foundation, it is right that we should review the fundamental issues of its governance. The Convention is preparing the ground for an Intergovernmental Conference to settle these issues methodically, inclusively and transparently.

The Convention's starting point is one of confidence. Whatever the day-to-day frustrations, on any big picture assessment Europe is a success. The achievements of the European project over the last 50 years are impressive. It has made a huge contribution to peace and stability in our region. It has helped to boost trade, jobs and growth in Britain and other member states. The way that EU membership has transformed Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Greece into prosperous economies in 20 years should be a tremendous encouragement to the Central and Eastern Europeans.

It is vital for Britain. 60% of our trade is with the EU; 3 million British jobs depend on it. EU membership gives us access to the single market, with 380 million consumers even before enlargement. It gives us more leverage to tackle the many challenges we share with our neighbours.

But Europe has to change.

50 years from the start of the European project, the world has changed almost beyond recognition. Today, our preoccupations are not about preventing war in Europe or ensuring adequate food production. That fact itself says something about what the European project has achieved. But we face new threats and challenges: security, environmental, and economic. And the European project itself faces problems: apathy,

disconnection from its citizens, lack of understanding of how it works.

Today's challenge for Europe goes to the heart of the very institutions which make up the European Union. These institutions, based on the carefully balanced triangle of Council, Commission and Parliament, underpinned by the Court of Justice, have brought Europe this far. They represent a quantum leap in democratic governance on an international scale - the pooling of sovereignty in order to extend the reach of democratic action.

But these institutions were designed for a Community of six, dealing with a handful of common policies. It has been clear for some time that they are struggling to manage today's Union of 15, with responsibilities which have greatly expanded since the 1950s. In their current form, they are not up to the job of serving tomorrow's Europe of 25 or more. Nor do they measure up to tomorrow's expanding tasks.

Europe's leadership is too weak. The musical chairs of the Council Presidency produces inefficiency and inconsistency. The enforcement of European law is too haphazard.

Europe's role in the world is too weak. We have made a start on building a common voice for Europe. But progress has been too slow and we have a long way to go. And the pace of change on key reforms - from economic modernisation to a more responsible system of agricultural support - is too slow.

THE OPPORTUNITY

For Britain, there is a simple choice to be made. Are we full partners in Europe, at the centre of its decision-making, influencing and shaping its direction; or are we at the back of the file, following warily a path beaten by others?

For 50 years that has been our choice. For 50 years, we have chosen to follow, first in joining; then in each new departure Europe has made.

For each British Prime Minister there is this dilemma: if we are anxious about Europe's direction, is it best to hang back until the direction is clear; or is it best to participate fully in the hope of making the direction more our own.

Usually we have chosen the former course.

But the problem with hanging back, however, is that in the end, Europe does move on and the choice is then to remain a straggler, drop out altogether or to catch up. And, because Europe is of such strategic importance to Britain, we usually choose to catch up. In other words, hanging back rarely results in us not participating finally, it just delays it so that the participation is on terms set by others. And often this has meant less favourable terms.

And with each new direction taken, Britain has tended to say: this far and no further. Then on the next development, we say the same. And so on.

What is the source of our anxiety? It is partly because we weren't there at the beginning. We have never felt it's our club. It's partly a chronic lack of self-confidence we suffer from sometimes as a nation, failing to believe in ourselves properly, so we think we will lose arguments in Europe, when actually when we put our minds to it, we usually win. We should have more self-confidence because we are a leading European power, always have been and always will be.

But it's also a genuine fear.

We want a Europe of sovereign nations, countries proud of their own distinctive identity, but co-operating together for mutual good. We fear that the driving ideology behind European integration is a move to a European superstate, in which power is sucked into an unaccountable centre. And what is more a centre of

fudge and muddle, bureaucratic meddling, which in economic terms could impede efficiency and in security terms may move us away from the transatlantic alliance.

So for all these reasons, our attitudes have, historically, been characterised by uncertainty; and that has bred in our psyche a feeling that Europe is something done to us by others, not something we do with others.

Now we have an historic opportunity to put our relations with the rest of Europe on a more serious footing and choose not to hang back but to participate fully and wholeheartedly. Europe itself is about to undergo profound change. It will expand to 25 members, then later probably to 30. Europe's rules are having to be rewritten. At the same time, crucial debates on European defence and the European economy are underway. All these developments will have a vast impact on Britain. Shaping their outcome is vital to our national interest. Now is a moment in time when isolation from decision-making is not just pointless but immensely damaging. There are debates here that have to be won.

So what should the British position be?

First, we must end the nonsense of "this far and no further". There are areas in which Europe should and will integrate more: in fighting crime and illegal immigration; to secure economic reform; in having a more effective defence and security policy. Britain should not be at the back of the file on such issues but at the front. On the Euro we should of course join if the economic conditions are right. A single currency with a single market for Europe makes economic sense.

Second, we should understand that our opposition to Europe as some federal superstate is not a British obsession. It is in fact the reasonably settled view of most members of the EU and, more importantly, of their people. Our electorates feel a close connection to their own national Governments; they do not feel the same towards European institutions.

Thirdly, however, the answer to the second point is not to reach for intergovernmentalism as a weapon against European institutions - again, if not a traditional British position, certainly perceived as such - but to recognise that Europe is and should remain an alliance of European and national Government. The very purpose of having a Council is to recognise that ultimately Europe represents the will of sovereign states. The key purpose of having a Commission with its own powers of initiative and a Parliament and Court organised on a European basis, is that we also recognise that we need supranational European institutions for Europe to work, ie for that sovereign will to be implemented effectively. The two are not in opposition to each other. It is the two together which are necessary for the unique union of nations that is Europe to function.

Take the issue of economic reform which Britain cares passionately about. Without Qualified Majority Voting and without a strong Commission, able to act independently, this programme of reform, so obviously crucial in these new economic times, will never materialise. It would be strangled by vested interests opposed to change. So a weak Commission is contrary to our own interests.

So what is the conclusion from these principles of approach? That the objective for Britain, from the Convention, should be a Europe that is strong, effective and democratic. That this requires a strengthening of Europe at every level: Council, Commission, Parliament and Court. And that the test we should apply to each issue is not whether it tilts the balance towards national Governments or European government. But rather in each case: does it strengthen Europe; does it make it more effective; does it make it more democratic?

The basic ideology should be described in this way. Europe is the voluntary coming together of sovereign nations. Their will is to combine together in the institutions of Europe in order to further their common interests. In so far as it is necessary to achieve these interests, they therefore pool their sovereignty in Europe. There is no arbitrary or fixed limit as to what they do collectively; but whether they do it depends on their decision as a group of nations. So whilst the origin of European power is the will of sovereign nations, European power nonetheless exists and has its own authority and capability to act.

I think it is important to spell this out. Curiously, when there was not much Europe the ideology mattered less or could drift into the visionary waters of a European superstate, without much worry. Now there is a lot of Europe and will be more, it is all the more necessary to anchor it properly and clearly where it belongs: with the nations of Europe. The price of greater and necessary integration is greater clarity of its fundamental basis and derivation.

It is easy to see how the early visionaries of Europe became so convinced of the limitations of purely intergovernmental structures. The ancient rivalries between Europe's powers had again brought us to devastation, and in the desperate circumstances of post war Europe, could all too easily have held Europe back from recovery.

But the European Community did not evolve as these early federalists expected, into a United States of Europe. Instead, its unique institutional relationship has been maintained to this day. Europe's nation states did not wither. On the contrary, aided to some extent by the fruits of European integration, they revived in a way which few might have predicted in the post-war gloom. Today the loyalty and affection of citizens for Europe's old countries is undiminished.

So the proposals I put forward today will aim to strengthen each part of the European structure. One further preliminary point. A lot of the debate on the Convention misses one obvious thing. A Europe of 25 is a different order of magnitude to a Europe of 15. People worry that the Council and Commission may end up in opposition to each other. That should not be the worry. The real worry is that both are going to face far greater strain on their efficacy because of the sheer number of members. There are distinct and vital roles for both and both need strengthening, for either to function well. In fact, we must start seeing this relationship between Council and Commission less as a balance or compromise and more as a partnership where each recognise their distinctive but mutually reinforcing roles.

So what does this mean in practical terms for the outcome of the Convention?

THE WAY FORWARD

First, we do need a proper Constitution for Europe, one which makes it clear that the driving ideology is indeed a union of nations not a superstate subsuming national sovereignty and national identity. This should be spelt out in simple language. A new Constitution for Europe can bring a new stability to the shape of Europe - not a finality which would prevent any future evolution, but a settlement to last a generation or more.

Second, the Convention is proposing a radical strengthening of the subsidiarity principle. Whereas at present the Commission and Council are in practice judge and jury of whether new legislative proposals pass the subsidiarity test, the Convention wants to give national parliaments new early warning rights, when the Commission first puts forward a proposal. If a sufficient number of national Parliaments object, the Commission's proposal would need to be revised. I welcome this as a practical response to the call I made two years ago in Warsaw for better involvement by national parliaments in European decision-making.

On the Charter of Rights, I repeat our clear view that though we welcome, of course a declaration of basic rights common to all European citizens and have ourselves incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights directly into British law, we cannot support a form of treaty incorporation that would enlarge EU competence over national legislation. There cannot be new legal rights given by such a means, especially in areas such as industrial law where we have long and difficult memories of the battles fought to get British law in proper order.

Third, we need a stronger and more effective Council.

The purpose of the Council is now, thanks to changes agreed at Seville, explicitly recognised as setting the agenda for Europe. This is the sensible task for the governing body of Europe.

But to do so with a Europe of 25 is impossible without change.

As I have said before, I believe there has to be a fixed Chair of the European Council. Like its counterparts the Commission and Parliament, the Council should have a stable chairmanship, enabling it to play its role more effectively in a stable partnership between the institutions.

The six-monthly rotating Presidency was devised for a Common Market of 6: it is not efficient nor representative for a Union of 25 and more. How can a Council with constantly shifting leadership be a good partner for the Commission and Parliament? How can Europe be taken seriously at international Summits if the Chair of the Council is here today, gone tomorrow? The old system has reached its limits. It creates for Europe a weakness of continuity in leadership: a fatal handicap in the development of an effective Common Foreign and Security Policy.

What's worse, each Presidency sees itself as setting its own distinctive agenda for the Union. The Lisbon Summit agreed a ten-year programme of economic and social reform for the Union. But it has not been easy to ensure proper attention to the co-ordinated follow up of that agenda across a wide range of sectoral Councils, each with their own hobby horses and vested interests. This is an example of where the rotating Presidency makes life more difficult for the Commission - and more seriously, where institutional weakness has led to higher unemployment than Europe need have suffered.

Most member states recognise this. But they worry that a fixed President would lead to the large nations dominating; or that the Commission would be downgraded. We must allay these concerns.

We could move to some form of "team Presidency" which allows the chairs of the principal Councils to be divided amongst Member States for a decent length of time, with the more permanent Chair of the European Council to co-ordinate that team. We should choose the team Presidency on a formula that I hope can combine fair rotation with the possibility of allowing Councils to elect candidates of outstanding merit. Within any team at any one time there will obviously be a majority of small countries because there are 19 small countries and 6 big ones in the Europe of 25.

The Council needs to be strengthened in other ways. Back home in Member States, the public should be better able to understand the Brussels processes. National Ministers' decisions should be visible. So Councils should vote on, and declare national positions on, legislation in the open. And we need fewer Councils. We have made progress towards cutting back the confusing multiplication of Councils from almost twenty to ten, but we should go further to make the Council simpler and easier to follow; and we will examine carefully all the interesting proposals put forward in this area by Giuliano Amato and others.

An enlarged Europe will need more qualified majority voting so that progress in a Europe of 25 or more is not constantly blocked by veto, and to provide a set of rules that are understandable to ordinary members of the public. All Member States in practice have their red lines on QMV, some of which must remain - for Britain on national control of taxes for example. But inevitably there will be more QMV and we welcome that.

Fourth, we should strengthen the Commission to enable it better to carry out Europe's agenda.

It is easy to knock the Commission. By definition, because it is based in Brussels, it is a remote bureaucracy - but smaller in size than many single Whitehall Departments. It takes unpopular decisions - because it is responsible for keeping Member States to the commitments they have agreed. This role as enforcer is unenviable, but essential. Governments rarely give it credit for its achievements, but are always quick to criticise its shortcomings. And it has at times in the past not managed its internal affairs well.

But we should stand up for the Commission. It plays an essential role. Along with the Court of Justice, it is the best guarantee of equality in the Union, ensuring that small countries or new Member States are not treated as second class members. And on enlargement, economic modernisation and CAP reform, the

Commission has been a strong progressive force.

Its role is two-fold: the initiation of detailed proposals within the strategic priorities set by the European Council and the implementation of political decisions. I want to see both those roles strengthened. I do believe it is time to communitise much of the Justice and Home Affairs Pillar. This will not, of course, affect the agreement Britain secured at Amsterdam in 1997 on our border controls. But it will mean integrated and effective action on issues to do with organised crime, drug dealing, asylum and immigration that affect all of Europe, cause huge distress and difficulty and cannot seriously be tackled by nations alone.

The Commission is rightly responsible for ensuring that there is a level playing field across the Member States; and that the detailed legal rules can be changed rapidly where that is sensible: for example through the Lamfalussy procedures to keep our financial services industry competitive in the new global market. We should improve the way the Commission consults on future framework legislation. In addition I favour strengthening the Commission's authority in making sure Europe's rules are obeyed and redress is available quickly in circumstances of a breach of the law.

Fifth, on foreign policy and defence, Europe must be able to speak more effectively, co-ordinate more effectively and act more effectively. This is not only a matter of institutional structure. It is also a matter of will and capability. In Kosovo, though it was a crisis on the doorstep of the EU, 85% of the military assets were American. True, we are now making the peace work; but the blunt fact is that without US participation, the rescue of Kosovo would never have happened. In the Middle East Javier Solana has made a big impact in enlarging our role, but it still does not match the vast amount of money we contribute.

Let me deal with one issue head-on. When it comes to the aftermath of September 11th or Iraq and WMD, the collective European voice is at times hesitant.

In reality Europe knows the importance of the transatlantic alliance. As the NATO Summit showed it remains the bedrock of our security. Even if the existing members of the EU were ambivalent about it - which they're not - the new accession countries are utterly firm. They want the alliance to remain. Period.

To achieve a unified European foreign policy, we need to decide what we are unifying around. In matters of defence and security, they are so fundamental to a nation's sense of itself, there is no institutional fix that can overcome a genuine difference of view.

The essence of unity, in my view, is to regard Europe as it grows in power, as a partner with the United States; not either its servant or its rival. In a sense the United Nations Security Council process over Iraq, involving France and Britain in different ways, showed how that partnership can work. And, as it did in that instance, it requires the United States to take into account of Europe as well as Europe to take account of the United States.

But the orientation of Europe toward the United States is absolutely at the core of whether Europe can become effective in foreign and security policy. We need to be clear about where we stand. I know some European colleagues think I am being unnecessarily difficult over European defence and its relations with NATO. But believe me, unless it is clear from the outset it is complementary to NATO, working with it, adding to our defence capabilities, not substituting Europe for NATO, then it will never work or fulfil its potential.

As for the institutional arrangements, the appointment of Javier Solana as High Representative has been a great success, thanks to him and Chris Patten. The EU has got its act much more together in the Balkans.

I favour the strengthening of European foreign policy, step by step, from the Balkans, to Europe's "near abroad" and then beyond. In this area, however, the lead responsibility should remain with the Council of Foreign Ministers. Britain cannot agree to the communitisation of defence or foreign policy. It is not practical or right in principle. Foreign policy can only be built by gathering a consensus among the Member States who possess the resources necessary to conduct it - the diplomatic skills, the bulk of aid budgets, and

of course the armed forces.

The powers of the High Representative should, however, be strengthened. He or she should chair the Foreign Ministers' Council, have an independent right of initiative, have control over a bigger budget, be able to strengthen his resources by seconding national diplomats to the Secretariat staff and be represented overseas in common European, not just Commission overseas delegations.

There is an overlap between the work of the High Representative and the External Relations Commissioner. Some have proposed that in future this role should be occupied by a single person wearing a double hat. As Javier Solana has said, this would raise practical problems that we need to debate. My point is simply this. Double hatting cannot be a way, through the back door, of communitising the CFSP. The High Representative's accountability to the Member States, and their responsibility for foreign policy, must remain clear cut.

I am ambitious for European defence. I do not want to limit Europe's security ambitions to low level peacekeeping. We need to resolve the outstanding issues on ESDP; and we are woefully short of the necessary defence capabilities - and it is that widening gap in capabilities that is the central issue Europe must address.

Again we need more Europe, not less. We need new decision making methods to get better value for money out of European defence budgets: strong peer review mechanisms; a European Defence Capability Development Agency, responsible to and run by the Member States, charged with identifying how capability gaps need to be filled and taking forward procurement projects to fill them; and further moves towards more open defence procurement to save on costly national protectionism.

Sixth, alongside a stronger Commission and a stronger Council, I believe we need a strong European Parliament which concentrates on what it does best - improving legislation. See for example the positive role it has played on the Prospectus Directive. I am open to the idea of improving the way the EU's budget is set through more effective decision making between Council and Parliament. It does not make sense to spend over 40% of our budget on agriculture, and it is right that the European Parliament's voice should be heard in all annual decisions on the EU spending.

In the debate about the accountability of the Commission to the European Parliament, I favour more effective scrutiny and the fullest democratic transparency.

But we must avoid at all costs turning the election of its President into a partisan wrangle, or allowing the Commission to become a prisoner of the Parliamentary majority.

We cannot simply see the Commission as an executive accountable to the Parliament. The Commission also has a crucial partnership with the Council which we must not weaken, and a vital independence which we must protect.

In this instance, therefore, we should not sanction any dramatic departures from the Community model as we know it. The Commission derives its legitimacy and authority from its independence. I am not arguing for an apolitical Commission: I am arguing for an impartial Commission, an independent Commission which draws its authority with Member States from this impartiality.

Seventh, we need a stronger Court of Justice.

I agree with the strengthening proposed by a distinguished group of British Conservatives in their recent well-argued proposals.

Along with the Commission, the Court of Justice is essential to the integrity of the Single Market and to the effectiveness of common action in an enlarged Union.

The EU's legal system has evolved and improved in recent years. We introduced the possibility of fines for failure to implement EU law with the Amsterdam Treaty in 1998, and the Court has already shown willingness to use this sanction. And the quality of application of EU law has improved constantly with the help of scoreboards to "name and shame" and vigilant monitoring by the Commission.

But we must go further. No country - including Britain - is blameless, but all must be put under stronger pressure to live up to their obligations swiftly. We should now examine ways to speed up its decisions - better fast tracking for priority cases for example. And we should look again at the effectiveness of the fines system. If the European Court were given the power to set a deadline for implementation then, if that deadline were not met, fines could follow immediately.

CONCLUSION

The aim should be a Europe that is strong: economically, through the single market and currency and economic reform; socially, through enhanced rights for its citizens and better security; politically, through being able to speak as one, backed by the defence capabilities that command respect.

It should be effective: through an independent Commission; a well-run Council; a Parliament better able to scrutinise; and a Court better able to enforce the law.

It should be democratic; greater integration, rooted in the freely given decisions of the nations that make up Europe; with greater openness and transparency of decision-making; greater participation and interaction of National Parliaments; greater connection between the European Parliament and the decisions of Europe; and with the independence of the Commission guaranteeing that the interests of smaller nations do not weigh any less than the large.

This is a one-off opportunity for reform: to set Europe on a clear course for the future, a Europe that as I have said before can be a superpower, if not a superstate. It is a future in which I want Britain to play its full and complete part.