

Interview with Hubert Védrine: the future of the European Union (Paris, 2 July 2008)

Source: Interview d'Hubert Védrine / HUBERT VÉDRINE, Frédéric Clavert, prise de vue : Alexandre Germain.- Paris: CVCE [Prod.], 02.07.2008. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:06:29, Couleur, Son original).

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/interview_with_hubert_vedrine_the_future_of_the_european_union_paris_2_july_2008-en-f139128e-570f-43e7-a49a-aac64cbf7e9d.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

Interview with Hubert Védrine: the future of the European Union (Paris, 2 July 2008)

[Frédéric Clavert] Given the French and Dutch ‘No’ votes in 2005 and the ‘No’ given by the Irish to the Treaty of Lisbon very recently, what does the future hold for the European Union?

[Hubert Védrine] I think we have to get things straight here: first of all, historically. It is commonly said that Europe represents peace. This is an absurd slogan. Europe did not make peace; it was utterly incapable of doing so. Europe was the battlefield of the world war. It was the Americans and the Soviet Union that imposed peace upon Europe. The Europeans benefited from the fact that peace had been established, and then those who had been on the right side in Western Europe benefited from this situation. It was the peace which had been imposed on Europe, without the Europeans having any say in the matter, that enabled Europe to be built. Later on, it was the Americans who set European integration in motion, because they found it vital that Western Europe should pick itself up again quickly in order to face the Soviet threat — which was quite a real one at the time — and after that there were European leaders who said to themselves: ‘Let’s take advantage of this situation to build close relations among Europeans, close from all points of view, so that we don’t repeat the past.’ However, since then, there has not been any risk of war in Europe anyway, so it cannot be said ... The connection between Europe and peace is not at all certain. One cannot say that there have been dangers of new wars breaking out between France and Germany, wars that fortunately were avoided because there was the European Union; this would be absurd, as it would be to say the same for wars between the Netherlands and Belgium or between Portugal and Spain. There is a sort of verbosity here, in the propaganda, and it is quite false. This needs to be said because, in times of crisis, people say that we must recapture the enthusiasm of the early days. There never was any enthusiasm. The people never asked for anything; it was the small groups of visionaries — very good, quite remarkable — that planned the next stages in the historical chronology to which I am alluding.

After that, since this was enlightened despotism, six countries, six, seven, eight countries, and then in each country there were ten people who created all that, and it got through Parliament more or less successfully — in the French Parliament, in 1957, most people thought that the Treaty of Rome was a highly dangerous leap in the dark, for example — but progress was made. When it started to go so far, particularly where the currency was concerned, that it was changing or beginning to change things in people’s lives, sooner or later a referendum would be necessary. This is what Mitterrand thought at the time of Maastricht: he thought that if he did not call for a referendum on the issue, the Treaty would be neither consolidated nor safeguarded, and thus the risk and dangers of its being undermined were clearly evident. He took a serious risk, and it was successful. Right. After that, there was talk of a social Europe, then a peoples’ Europe, then a Europe that should have an influence on all areas; absolutely everything which has to do with Europe and with the nation state is mixed up together, and people who think that Europe is doing too much then demand that it do more in one area ... In short, that is the situation right now.

In such a context, what is to be done? It is my impression that the peoples of Europe are not asking for unification; there is no evidence for this. For instance, when a people is given its say, except in one or two exceptional cases, there is no evidence for this. On the other hand, no European people has opposed the continuation of the integration process either; if there is a common policy on energy or a new Airbus or a new Erasmus project, nobody will be against it. Nobody. However, it is the idea of unification, of overriding each nation state — obsolete, archaic, outdated, etc. — by means of a European superstructure — there the European citizens will not toe the line. On the contrary, the foremost demand in Europe today is for local powers. They do not want power to be based still further away, exercised in a language that is not their own, and within a system too complex to be comprehensible. That is my opinion. I think that that is the situation, and that the next step, therefore, should be to make a pause in the unification process. If Lisbon is finally adopted by all parties, if the Irish come to a decision on their own, without being pestered every day to vote once again, and it works — all well and good. Then, if the others finally ratify it as well, excellent, we move from Nice to Lisbon; if not, we continue with Nice. That is international law. There is no use complaining about it. We cannot preach law and democracy to the whole world and then be unwilling to apply it when it comes to Europe itself. We’d never see the end of it. Whether we stay with Nice for a time or whether we go on to Lisbon, my point is the same: I think we have to soft-pedal on unifying the peoples of the Union and rather revive the integration process, common policy, large-scale projects, by not giving the priority to

choosing those policies that seek to manage the details of the everyday life of European citizens at the European level; that is an complete aberration. Sometimes people ask for this to be done, but it is an aberration.

I believe that over the coming years the priority must be given to major policies that will enable us to defend European interests more effectively in the face of globalisation. It could be energy, it could be the hardening of our positions in the WTO, it could be the intelligent, but at the same time humane management of migration flows, it could be initiatives in military matters — I dare not mention European defence, because Europe is already defended by the Alliance and national defence systems, so there is little room for manoeuvre. However, initiatives in military matters could be taken, particularly by participating in peace-keeping operations as well as cooperating in the field of armaments. There could also be industrial initiatives, more Galileo projects in different fields, initiatives in the fields of research and higher education, there could be lots of things. I think that the field is wide open, in fact, and if we go back over these issues there will be disagreements. For example, the common energy policy is absolutely indispensable, except that the Europeans disagree on nuclear policy and on the stance we should take towards Russia. But we might as well discuss it, we might as well identify the points of disagreement and work on them rather than quarrel year after year about pseudo-constitutions; this would seem to me more important.

In my view we have overemphasised the role played by the treaties over the last ten years or so — although again I find it very useful to have a treaty that works well and allows easier decision-making — but there again, if we don't have one, that is not a excuse to do nothing. When people talk nostalgically of Mitterrand, Kohl or Delors, no one remembers which treaty was in force. Nobody knows which treaty was in force in 1984 or in 1989 in fact. Mrs Merkel is regarded as having had a very good Presidency a year and a half ago, which is quite true, and this took place within the ambit of the Treaty of Nice. The French Presidency of Mr Sarkozy takes place under the Treaty of Nice, since, had the Irish voted 'Yes', we should only have changed the treaty the following year anyway. This has therefore been somewhat exaggerated, and it is essential that the crisis — not of Europe, but rather of the mythology of Europe — should not serve as a pretext to do nothing and to hinder progress in all the areas of specific policy that I have mentioned.