

EU is at a Crossroad

By Troels Mylenberg

EU must join the globalisation age and prove to be more than yet another fossilised political construction outrun by time. Perhaps by demanding something from its citizens.

A period of reflection – the words are beautiful but ambiguous: who are supposed to do the thinking, the European people or the European Union? I am not going to speculate on the purpose of the period of reflection which was proclaimed after the constitutional collapse this summer. But indeed EU is at a crossroad – to put it mildly.

More bluntly put, we are dealing with a political and economical community that has run out. Generally, it appears rather absurd that the EU which for years divided Europe in two – the rich Western Europe and the poor Eastern Europe – now, after the final reunion of the east and the west on 1 May 2004, stands more paralysed than ever before.

Naturally, the large membership itself causes things to take extra time, but the euphoria over the united Europe is no longer found. And the family into which Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen so warmly welcomed the new countries in December 2003 seems somewhat disadvantaged.

The question, of course, is whether this construction, The European Union, at all belongs to the future, as anything but a regional chamber of commerce with an attached political secretariat.

The Global Race

Globalisation preys on constructions of the past, in the sense that all the possibilities following from globalisation overtake everything else. In this race, the EU appears – in spite of all its good intentions of educational exchange, cultural initiatives and attempts to conjure up a common European identity – like a knee-injured tortoise. Globalisation creates new non-governmental connections between individuals and organisations, and if the EU has a strategy to regard any problem as a possibility when the “period of reflection” is over, then one must quietly conclude that the EU is up to its neck in possibilities.

The Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, has used the period of reflection to put himself in charge of his Globalisation Council – an advisory body created to take the bearing of Denmark’s development in relation to the world. Not a word on EU in this connection. Denmark is supposed to be the land of ideas. The first country in the world in which the art of good ideas is taught as part of the school curriculum, and where future citizens will be walking idea generators. No less will do. This is the sound of Fogh’s poetic and inspiring vision of how to navigate Denmark safely and strengthened into the globalisation age.

But one thing is to speak of the necessity and benefit of ideas; another – and far more interesting – is how the Prime Minister is going to realise his toast speech. And this is where the European angle could play a part. But why, then, is it not Europe that is supposed to be the continent of ideas? Why

don't Fogh and his European colleagues formulate this vision for Europe when this is where a project is really needed?

Wanted: a Culture of Ideas

As ideas are not delivered by mail or from above, an officially proclaimed period of reflection is obviously not a guarantee for new thoughts. Ideas do not emerge until existing knowledge is combined with a new perspective. Exactly the perspective that is so overtly missing in the European project.

For no matter how much they shout for more and new knowledge, what we need in Denmark and Europe is neither knowledge nor intellectual resources. On the contrary, we are in desperate need of a common project, a common vision. Or actually a culture; a culture of ideas, to be precise. A culture of ideas that doesn't just embrace the students at the proud universities of Europe, the professional academic, the successful entrepreneur and all the café latte-drinking mannequins of the metropolis, but just as much embraces and inspires the single mother, the school teacher, the winegrower, the craftsman, the nurse, the labourer and the senior citizen to think along and have faith that their ideas are worthwhile for others to learn about and be challenged by, if the idea force is supposed to rise to unseen heights.

A new perspective is what is needed in our globalised world. And at the moment, that perspective appears not to be present in the political construction of Europe, where the only thing that keeps us together is our talking about what keeps us together.

Answers Require Questions

Far more urgent and interesting political themes have entered the field at the spot where the EU left in paralysis – and who says anyone is really going to listen when EU eventually returns? A lot of new political themes emerge and only a few regards the EU as a necessary player. Or put differently: now that the EU has stopped its development to reflect, a lot of people will probably realise that all the political agendas that were formerly so important are not missed at all. Especially because the EU refrains from addressing the urgent question of globalisation.

“Unity in Diversity” – the proud slogan of the EU. But this diversity does not seem particularly nursed in a Europe that moves toward unfruitful, ceaseless attempts to discuss structures of decision-making rather than talking about the essential themes that do require decisions to be made. A Europe which, marked by political crises and grave men in suits, seems to do everything in its power to distance itself from the people, simply because the feeling of a popular community cannot be designed from an office chair in Brussels. And because millions of euros spent on campaigns and debate does not automatically imply that anyone bothers to listen.

More than that is required; perhaps most of all that EU demands its citizens to ask themselves the good Kennedy question: ask not what Europe can do for you, ask what you can do for Europe. The answers will be manifold and this, exactly, is the very seed of a prosperous EU.