

The State of the Union

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“Quo vadis, Europa?”

Europe seems to be pulling in two directions at the moment. Thus under the Lisbon Treaty, the institutions of the EU have received a considerable boost. As against that, not only are we witnessing a growing Euroscepticism, but increasingly the member state interest appears to be a stronger motivating force than the European interest. Indeed, while nationalism is universally condemned, the national interest has been widely accepted as a desirable and, even, honourable pursuit. The thought that the distinction between nationalism and the national interest has to be measured with a microscope is somehow forgotten. And, above all, the proposition that a transcendental European interest frequently serves the long term interests of the member states has also receded, though not exactly disappeared from sight entirely.

This dualism between the EU and its member states can be seen in various fields. Most strikingly, it is assuming the form of a contrast between law and politics. By and large, member states will obey the legal provisions of the EU, but their political objectives can point in other directions. And where law and politics are at variance, at variance precisely because the national interest overrides the European, solidarity suffers. The sense that Europe once had, that member states shared certain ideals, that no member state would go entirely against the interests of others, is much weaker than it once was.

Intergovernmentalism

Most strikingly, to some extent in consequence, we are witnessing a rise in intergovernmentalism, the natural consequence of the rise of the national interest perhaps. The problem with intergovernmentalism is the declining asset of trust; states in Europe compete, they compete for markets, for investment opportunities, for prestige and above all, for power. The community method was devised to prevent this competitiveness, which had reached tragic lengths during the first half of the 20th century, from reproducing the same in the

second half. This has worked, and worked well, but the lessons of the 1940s seem to have receded too far for them to serve as a warning for the 21st century.

I am not suggesting that all has been lost, that we have returned to the cut-throat world of the interwar period. Nevertheless, there are some warning signs on the horizon and we would be foolish, not to say foolhardy, if we were to ignore them. The scene before us is particularly intriguing if we come to it with the understanding that the common perspective on Europe, a shared recognition of a Europe that brought benefits to all is growing threadbare, is weaker than it was. Possibly this view of a weakening commitment to Europe is more visible from the smaller states than from the larger ones. Small states have done particularly well out of European integration because thereby they have claimed and often received parity of esteem and a security that the large states would not intervene in their affairs. The great powers of the pre-1939 era built up their coteries of client states. The European integration process put a stop to this, to the untold benefit of European stability.

Let me suggest a little thought experiment. Try to imagine international relations in Europe without the integration process. It's inconceivable, that is the criterion of the success of integration. Without an integration process structured around the ideas of Jean Monnet and the ideals of Altiero Spinelli, the solutions to the inevitable conflicts of interest in Europe would have been driven for the most part by unconstrained power; the recognition of a shared interest by the parties to a conflict would have been decidedly marginal. The trouble is that the rise of intergovernmentalism is a potential threat to the European integration process understood as a conflict resolution mechanism.

Even with many decades of the integration process behind us, intergovernmentalism can potentially initiate attitudes and assumptions that work against the community method. Crucially, without the underpinning of the community method, intergovernmentalism on its own would find it difficult to guarantee the stability and democracy that have been the primary markers of Europe's success. The reason is simple. The logic of intergovernmentalism points away from the shared commitment to make Europe work as an entity. Member state governments are necessarily motivated by the national interest, which is defined in narrow terms, and the national interest frequently, if not invariably, tends to downgrade, if not actually to sideline the commitment to a Europe that secures democracy and stability. It is widely accepted that democracies do not make war on one another but how

far is this to due democracy and how far to the shared sense of partnership that integration has brought about?

Euroscepticism

There is widespread agreement that Euroscepticism is on the rise, that a growing number of people and politicians do not see the purpose of European integration and, in fact, are actively hostile to it. While it would be a mistake to see the entire spectrum of Euroscepticism as a single, homogeneous entity, hostility to Brussels can and does serve as a common denominator for a variety of political forces.

Some of these Eurosceptics are straightforward nationalists, who see Brussels as an enemy to their dream of a simpler nationally driven world. Others are, maybe, more nuanced and articulate their opposition to integration as an anti-bureaucratic commitment. Others yet see the EU as an obstacle to the ideal of a Europe wholly open to globalisation, without barriers of any kind; many of them are motivated by a universalism that sees the EU as a Eurocentric institution that hinders the coming into being of the single world of their dreams. These positions are miles apart, but they can and do make common cause when the need arises.

The current economic crisis is also having an impact on attitudes towards Europe. There are demonstrations, disturbances, protests against unemployment, which betoken a general sense of unease about the future, especially on the part of the younger age cohorts which are fearful that they have worse prospects than their elders. What is noteworthy here is that for some this experience of protest and unease is likely to leave a residue. They will be less well disposed towards a political and economic system that appears to have rather less to offer them than their parents. Some, as a result, will certainly be vulnerable to radicalisation and this radicalisation will – in good part – be on the right. Left radicalism, which has dominated the political field for two generations, is slowly wearing out and losing its power of attraction. From this perspective, it is logical that radicalism should move towards the far-right, there is nowhere else for it to go. And right-radicalism is almost invariably hostile to the European integration project. This process is enhanced – indirectly, to be sure – by the intergovernmentalism that I have already mentioned. The state-national interest, in their view, trumps all.

The media

Besides, this complex of processes is further assisted by the way in which the media treat the EU. For my part, I am decidedly puzzled by the extreme reluctance, unwillingness or inability of the media to recognise the European Union as an autonomous site of power – autonomous because the institutions of the EU function on their own, they are not subordinated to the member states. This means that there is real politics taking place in the EU – there are contests for power, debates, arguments over the best way forward. Political journalism ought to find the EU exciting for its own sake, yet this seldom happens. EU politics is regularly interpreted as a conflict of interests between the EU and the member state concerned, in the eyes of the journalists involved anyway.

Then, one of the functions of the media in a democracy is to translate power and the working of institutions to public opinion. This does happen with national, with member state politics, but is hardly ever found with politics at the European level. Third, not least because the media serve a national audience, there is a strong tendency to describe whatever happens in Brussels as a two-way contest between the member state in question and the so-called remote, impenetrable bureaucracy in Brussels. Competent journalists should not find it impenetrable, though they regularly say that they do. And this contest is then served up as a zero-sum game, that the member state has extracted something from Brussels. Let it be added that member state politicians are not above conniving at this distorted picture of what happens. Finally, journalists are inclined to approach power with a deep sense of suspicion, that all power, all exercise of power is somehow illicit and politicians are on the make and nothing else. Taken together, all this adds up to a strong and negative cocktail, which the EU finds difficult to counteract. And precisely because the EU's case tends to go by default, the image and thereby the legitimacy of the European integration process is weakened.

The current economic crisis and especially the tensions within the Eurozone have added to this mixture. There is a simple stereotyped picture of hardworking north Europeans having to subsidise idle south Europeans. That there have been abuses of the rules is beyond question, but the stereotyping – aided and abetted by the media – is something else again. The media preference to simplify complex issues and then exaggerate them is certainly culpable.

Then, there is a phenomenon which might be regarded as the price of success of democracy or at any rate an unintended consequence of that success. The classical model of democratic

politics was overwhelmingly constructed around parliaments, political parties and the state. Popular sovereignty could be seen as having been vested in relatively few actors, which made the question of where power lay seemingly straightforward and accountable. This model has changed and political power is both fragmented and dispersed. There are countless new actors, some of which blithely ignore popular sovereignty – the capital markets, banks and multinationals being the most obvious. The growth of state and international bureaucracies and their capacity to regulate society, together with their remoteness, also falls into this category. To these can be added lobbies, advocacy groups, civil society, the media, minorities of various kinds and, not least, the ease of access to information thanks to the internet. Much of this can be seen as empowering and a source of countervailing power to the state and politicians. But it has also had the consequence of making party politics less relevant, because the voters understand that power has moved elsewhere. Unfortunately that “elsewhere” is inaccessible to the voters, hence some of them become open to radicalisation. The EU, with its indirect power over the member states, is an obvious target.

Some of the responsibility for this decline in the political significance of the integration process, however, lies with the political class in the member states. There is a clear tendency to take the EU and its achievements for granted. Indeed, on technical and functional grounds, there is a more or less continuous transfer of powers to the EU. It is self-evident that, by way of example, the fight against organised crime is far more effective at the European level, than at that of the member state. The examples could be multiplied – the single market, environmental protection, food safety and a host of other technical areas are more effectively run at the European level. The trouble is that technical issues of this kind are complex and are thought to bore public opinion – this may even be true – so the case is seldom made why the particular government competence is transferred to Brussels. In effect, what we have been witnessing is a continuous transfer of powers to Brussels, but the corresponding legitimisation stays with the member states.

European citizenship

This raises a particular difficulty, an unresolved contradiction. Citizens of the member states are simultaneously citizens of the EU, but what does this actually mean? Whether we like it or not, very few people are conscious of a European political identity, they frequently lack the information about European issues and see their primary, if not exclusive, political loyalty to the state of which they are citizens. Consequently they are easily mobilised into decisions that

will favour the member state and not Europe. This proposition was vividly illustrated during the two Irish referenda and by the so-called disconnect that Irish commentators identified.

The irony of all this is that while a political Europe barely exists outside the Brussels and a few specialised areas in the member states, in sociological and cultural terms, Europeans today are far more alike and have far more in common than was the case 50 years ago. There is, if one cares to look, a Europe of cultural practices – sport, popular music, fashion, women's magazines, gossip magazines, star cults, celebrities, foodstuffs and a host of other phenomena are near identical throughout Europe. And what cements this is international English, a near universally used second language, the new Esperanto; paradoxically only native speakers are at a disadvantage, because for them English is loaded with native secondary and tertiary meanings. In this world of cultural practices, Europe comes together in the Eurovision song contest and the small states regularly outvote the large ones. There is one insurmountable problem with this cultural Europe, though – it has no political content, no political consciousness, no political identity. And I do not see how the culture could be converted either.

Indeed, in areas where cultural attitudes overlap with political power, there are strong boundaries that prevent this happening. The clearest illustration of this is over immigration, whether we are talking about intra-European labour migration or immigration from outside Europe. In summary form, the majority find this phenomenon hard to deal with and elaborate forms of resistance. And because they attribute the arrival of immigrants to the EU, this resistance takes on anti-European, Eurosceptic quality. We can see aspects of this development in a variety of EU member states. The one that pulled me up with particular force was the survey finding in February that nearly 50 percent of the United Kingdom population would support an anti-immigration party if it shunned violence and fascist imagery. There are obvious parallels in France, the Netherlands and elsewhere. It seems to me that the message from sizeable section of the voters is clear – there must be an end to unrestricted immigration and the EU is to blame, together with the elites that have neglected the wishes of the people. This may be a populist message, but it has resonance.

In this tour d'horizon, I have concentrated on the negative trends affecting the State of the Union, while stressing how vital the integration process has been and remains for democracy and stability in Europe. The processes that I have been sketching are relatively slow, there is

no sudden, identifiable breaking point, which – of course – makes the situation that much harder to identify. This also means, on the other hand, that if we do identify these processes that are sapping the commitment to Europe, remedies become feasible. In an oversimplified fashion, it boils down to this: is there the political will to recreate a European consciousness? To relaunch the idea that there exists a European interest that is to the benefit of the member states? And, building on that, to give the European Union the instruments to balance creeping intergovernmentalism? The Hungarian presidency did not launch the slogan “Strong Europe” by chance. And these last five months have shown that for all the difficulties, building a Strong Europe is, indeed, possible.