

VIRTUAL THINK TANK Zoom Session 2: November 10, 2020

EUROPE AND THE EUROPEAN

Europe geographically is the western projection of the Eurasian landmass, traditionally extending latitudinally from Ireland at the far end of the continental shelf to the Urals, and longitudinally from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. Although, given the current political realities, the eastern limit would possibly now describe a frontier incorporating Bulgaria, Rumania, the Ukraine, Belorussia, and the Baltic States and no further. Within Europe are, following the departure of the U.K., the twenty-seven states of the European Union. Although being European can be ascribed to any native of a European state as well as all immigrants who choose to become so, because of its centrality and influence the EU can now lay claim to having a special role in shaping the thinking of *what it means to be European*. For discussing this subject, this session is arranged under three sub-topics: history and culture, contemporary Europe and the European, and future Europe and the European.

History and Culture

The history of Europe has, ever since the time of the Greek city-states and the early Roman Empire, been characterized by unity-in-diversity. It has never accepted complete unification. But equally important, it has resisted complete disruption (1). Attempts at unification by force of arms from the Romans to Charlemagne through Napoleon to Hitler all found it beyond their reach. Outbursts of extremism have had their day, but have ultimately not destroyed Europe's distinct identity from within. At the last resort, at least until tensions and hostilities became global, an inward-directed balance of power has been sought. Alternatively, external threats to this identity have likewise been repelled over the long term. The binding force keeping Europe together is its culture, meaning the way in which the arts, customs, and religious beliefs of a community act upon each other to create a distinctive whole. Dominant among these elements is religion, and the Christian religion in Europe's case (2). Even the laws, forms of government, and ideals of Greco-Roman provenance and transmitted throughout the world over the past five hundred years of Europe's prominence, are coated in Christianity. After the Middle Ages, however, pluralism coupled with conflict spread over the land, driven by the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Much of this was constructive, but Europe has over recent times also fought its internal battles on a planetary scale, and if they have not culminated in its own demise they have in the final analysis changed its relationship with that wider world. A major step to halt such internally provoked belligerence was the Schumann Declaration which put in train what eventually led to the EU.

Contemporary Europe and the European

This started with the "inner six" countries forming the European and Steel Community who were subsequently in 1958 transformed into the European Economic Community (the Common Market). Pitted against this as of 1959 was the more loosely organised "outer seven", the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) (3). The U.K. gave up EFTA for the EU in 1973, and by the 1990s the latter had progressed from the purely economic to assuming, in addition, a political persona. Its institutions include the Commission, the Council of Ministers,

and the European Council, all with some policy-making powers, plus the European Parliament which purportedly exerts its influence through the legislative and budgetary processes as well as supervision of the executive (4). This has engendered criticism that the EU was encroaching more and more on national sovereignty and endeavouring to become a superstate or federal hegemony, whereas it is better described as a trans-governmental system bringing together a group of sovereign states for their mutual benefit. Nevertheless, the atmosphere has soured in Europe over the past thirty years, notably towards the EU. Idealism has crossed swords with some quite reasonable practical doubt. The 'Constitution for Europe' signed on for by the member country leaders in 2004, for example, was unwieldy, unreadable and unread (5). The EU is remote, with an identity deficit. Instead, nationalism and populism are on the rise and liberalism and internationalism have been under threat. Result: the committed European and have been forced onto the defensive.

Future Europe and the European

For tomorrow's European to survive it is desirable that the EU exist for his or her economic, political and cultural sustenance. But critics object that it is unnaturally superimposed, it deracinates familiarity and custom. In repost, the European must emphasize that the ideal of a united Europe has a centuries-old tradition which goes beyond the self-aggrandisement of Napoleons and Hitlers. Two centuries ago as Napoleon's nationalist triumphalism was crumbling, the French idealist Comte de Saint-Simon was predicting in effect a new European order. There would come a time when it would be recognized that it was necessary to regulate the general interest before turning to the individual national interest. His reasoning was quintessentially "modern": imperfections would diminish, problems would be solved, wars would be eliminated (6). This contrasts with the reign of populism already apparent in the U.K. The inclination to confrontation, the personalisation of leadership, the denigration of institutions, and hostility towards pluralism (7). This is precisely what the LibDem European should be fighting against. However, this is far from being a simple matter of raising the drawbridge. An obsession with security can be a threat to freedom rather than its saviour (8). The European should take a creative approach regarding the Europe of the future. Part of this creativity could be the contemplation of institutional change to encourage the people of Europe to identify more readily with the EU, starting with governance. The ten propositions of Thierry Chopin and Lukas Macek serve as a reference (9).

See following page for the Propositions

Propositions presented by Thierry Chopin and Lukas Macek

1. Merging the posts of President of the Commission and President of the Council of Europe.
2. Designating the President of the Commission/Council of Europe, the President of the Eurogroup, and High Commissioner of the Union for foreign affairs and security policy at the same time.
3. Allowing the designated President of the Commission to put in place a politically coherent team.
4. While awaiting the realisation of Proposition 1, reforming the procedure for designating the President of the Council of Europe.
5. Synchronisation of national electoral cycles to prioritise EU dynamics at the level of intergovernmental institutions.
6. Reforming the European Parliament's electoral system.
7. Defining the status of the opposition within the European Parliament.
8. Given that the lists are determined at the national level, encouraging the national political parties to adopt strict rules for when selecting candidates.
9. Creating an incentive financial system for financing European political parties to promote a variable European environment and to contribute to inducing a public European space to come into existence.
10. Start doing politics just that (9).

For references – see next page

References

- (1) Dennett, F.J. (1960), *Europe A History*. Melbourne: Linehan & Shrimpton Pty. Ltd., p.97.
- (2) Eliot, T.S. (1962 [1948]), *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. London: Faber and Faber, pp.120.
- (3) Thomson, David (1964), *Europe since Napoleon*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd., p.843.
- (4) Nugent, Neill (1989), *The Government and Politics of the European Union*. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, Chapters 4 – 7.
- (5) Booker, Christopher and Richard North (2005), *The Great Deception: Can the European Union survive?* London: Continuum, pp.540-7.
- (6) Saint-Simon, Comte de (2014 [1813]), *De la réorganisation de la société européenne*. Paris: Editions Payor & Rivages, p.142.
- (7) Krastev, Ivan (2017), *Le destin de l'Europe*. Pennsylvania, PA: Penn Press, pp.99-100.
- (8) Hayek, F.A. (2001[1944]), *The Road to Serfdom*. London and New York: Routledge Classics, pp.123-4.
- (9) Chopin, Thierry and Lukas Macek (2016), 'Reformer l'Union européenne: un impératif politique', in *L'Union européenne entre implosion et refondation*. Paris: Editions Mimésis, pp.62-8.