QUO VADIS EUROPE?

On Friday 12 May the German controversial Foreign Minister and leader of the Greens, Joschka Fischer, with the support of Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder called in Berlin for a federal Europe. The proposal has been received rather well in France. French Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, and Foreign Minister, Hubert Vedrine, regard the Fisher initiative as an important contribution to the debate European integration though there have also been critics like the Interior Minister, Pierre Chevènement. France will host the next EU Inter Governmental Conference at the end of this year in Nice. At the Nice summit two different challenges await the current 15 Member States: to organise the enlarged EU more efficiently in order to render it more effective and to preserve the opportunity for the Member States that have the political will to forge closer co-operation.

Fishers’ personal vision is the result of several meetings with his French counterpart over the last 18 months. It has been motivated by the launch of the Euro, the upcoming European enlargement and the fear among ‘integrationists’ that increasing the size of the Union beyond 15 will mean policy paralysis stalling further European integration. The existing EU institutional set-up designed for the original Six (Benelux, France, Germany, and Italy) is inadequate to cope with the additional strains of enlargement and guarantee the fluent development of the EMU. Therefore, Fisher proposes that the original Six move towards a federation, a kind of avant-garde Europe inside the EU with a common constitution, a government and a real parliament. The new constitution would divide powers between the government and the Member States. It would have a bi-cameral parliament elected by direct vote: one composed of representatives from the member countries’ parliaments, and a second chamber along the lines of the German Bundesrat. The government would be drawn from the national governments or based upon the present Commission with a powerful and directly elected president. A strong Franco-German axis would form the basis and serve as a locomotive for further European political unification.

The proposal is clear, has a long term perspective and makes the Franco-German motor central again. However, several problems and questions arise.

(a) National sovereignty and asymmetry.
First, federal failures primarily occur because minorities continue to be outnumbered at the federal level of government. Within the EU opposition to federalism comes especially from small countries because they will loose most by giving up their national sovereignty.
Second, closer co-operation between the original Six needs the approval of the others unless the Six are going to function outside the current EU framework. A fracture between the avant-garde and the arriere-garde might appear if the arriere-garde does not agree.
Third, how is an avant-garde Europe going to forge a coherent policy when not backed by other Member States (especially true in the foreign policy and military domain)?
Fourth, how is the Commission in Brussels going to function as a future government for the avant-garde and at the same time as the executive power of the EU? Does this mean a duplication of institutions?

(b) Criteria.

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If the *avant-garde* Europe is not exclusive, what are the criteria when other countries want to join?

(c) *France and federalism.* The German federal model served as a blueprint for Fishers’ vision. France, on the contrary, has a very strong tradition of centralisation (national identity) and is not familiar with federalism at all. If the Franco-German axis is going to be the basis of a federal Europe, France will have to make serious institutional efforts.

In the past, these problems and questions led to the development of several other models. Four models emerged (a United States of Europe, a multispeed Europe, variable geometry, and flexible integration) all sharing ‘an ever closer Union’ as ultimate goal. But they all differ regarding the means and pace of this process. A trade off between transparency and efficient decision-making on the one hand and flexibility and inclusiveness for the Member States on the other hand seems always to appear.

It might be far better just to allow more flexibility within the scope of the Union, with groups of countries able to agree to develop new policies among themselves in open partnerships. Euro-11 and the Shengen Area are a form of such a partnership, with very stringent membership criteria. Such a flexible form of integration would allow the Union to grow with enlargement, but at the same time permit those countries which wish to integrate further in certain areas to do so without being held up by others.

The idea came up in 1996 and was partially included in the Treaty of Amsterdam but rendered too difficult by giving a veto to each Member State in the European Council. In Nice in December the 15 EU governments will update the flexibility clause, allowing certain countries to forge closer co-operation. This would also avoid the disadvantage of a ‘fortress Europe’: closing off Europe from the rest of the world would be detrimental to the associated countries as they attempt to maintain high economic growth and raise productivity. The EU is a halfway house between a confederation and federation and this is a very inconvenient position in the context of further enlargement. It rather wants to move on and realise Monnets’ and Schumans’ vision: ‘*Le vin est tiré, il faut le boire*’.