

The Future of Europe after the Inconceivable -- again

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The latest in the series of inconceivable events, commonly termed “crises”, those to conform Europe, “Brexit,” the disastrous result of David Cameron’s adventure in brinkmanship, is yet a further reminder that Europe is in desperate need of reliable, insightful leadership. That needs to be qualified at once. In speaking of leadership, we are merely not talking about insightful individuals, who by virtue of the strength of character and penetrating intelligence are capable of putting the situation under control, but about the sort *institutionalized* leadership that enables the twenty-eight current EU states respond *quickly* and *decisively* to the sorts of on-going inconceivabilities that have been arising with distressing regularity since the finance crisis of 2008. Naturally boldly courageous, informed individuals of intelligence and character are absolute prerequisites for the kind of leadership that I speak of but they are only the first elements in a renewed process of *collective* decision making that does not leave the EU open to the charges of overly bureaucratized incompetence of all important matters that fuels the fires of our populist critics throughout Europe today. Creating such leadership is no small challenge given the fact that any large-scale revisions of existing treaties and agreement are absolutely out of the question in the atmosphere of fear and distrust that is currently so much a part of the European scene. Our leaders need to create a strong EU identity in European citizens of the sort that has been eluding us for decades. That means dispelling fear and distrust in the European electorate: identity, after all, is only a problem when it is threatened. Competent leadership builds hope and trust on the basis of solid political deeds and not mere phrases, with which populism is content to rest. So, in a sense, we have to pull a rabbit out of our hat – and one that is wise and courageous at that. However difficult it turns out to be the future of the Union depends upon our ability to do so. The absolute presupposition for the creation of such leadership is that a strong sense of the majority within the Union itself and especially in the member states will have to be developed. Compromised unanimity on the basis of shaky consensus is a wholly inadequate tool as Robert Schuman recognized at the beginning of the

European venture decades ago. Majority decisions by the leadership organ have to be binding on all at the expense of penalties of a sort we do not know how to begin to discuss at this stage. Collective leadership is not a mere bagatelle and that has to be clear to everyone from the start. The trick – and it will be no small one – will be to manage this (roughly) within existing institutional frameworks.

Reflections on Brexit

The easiest question to answer with respect to Brexit is what does it mean for the remaining twenty seven remaining member states? The obvious part of the answer seems quite clear: Germany's role in shaping the EU's destiny will be bigger and more powerful than ever. The geographic seat of actual power will shift further northwards and eastwards and the burdens upon Germany will increase – unless of course the sort of institutionalized collective leadership described above is in one way or another implemented. In any case "Brexit" means "more Germany," which is surely a mixed blessing for everyone involved including the Germans.

What are the lessons of Brexit. There are a lot more than could even be mention in passing here but a couple of them are especially important to underscore. In one sense it was not entirely surprising that the British people (more exactly the segment that took the time and trouble to vote) opted out for the sake of regaining with it took to be lost sovereignty. The idea that the EU is actively undermining our freedom rather than expanding it, the so-called "democracy deficit" in Europe first was mentioned in 1977; whereas the average age of Europeans is somewhere around 43. Reflecting for a moment it's easy to see that any citizen concerned with the issue now age 43 could scarcely have known a Europe that was obviously democratic. Little wonder that there are traces of discontent and even rebellion nearly everywhere in Europe today. So Brexit should surprise us less than it has.

Naturally the situation in Britain was strongly exacerbated by the Yellow Press, which simply spread flagrant lies, for example, about Turkey's imminent accession to the Union to fan the flames of discontent. We are all aware that a similar kind of journalism seems to be continually befuddling Europeans everywhere. We desperately need to reintroduce truth into politics – Mr. Trump is the best example worldwide of the dangers of politics without truth. He fuels the very fear and mistrust

that true politics aims to dispel. He is the complete anti-politician. Needless to say, for anyone with the slightest sense of a functioning civil society there could hardly be a more horrible nightmare. We need to discover yet better ways to support responsible journalism everywhere in Europe, if we are to maintain our traditions of freedom. This much is clear; when wishful thinking replaces hard facts public debate is impossible; for if every opinion is legitimate, then no opinion is legitimate. Populism in all its forms is the politics of wishful thinking, which is nothing less than the complete destruction of true politics which seeks to establish the common good of society as a wholly across profound but legitimate differences of interest on the basis of reasoned compromise reached through majority decisions. Among other things such wishful thinking in politics makes the business of coalition building, so central to European politics, virtually impossible as we see almost everywhere with Spain and Austria as primary examples. The EU must take every possible step to encourage responsible journalism in Europe. This is becoming a matter of life and death in Europe today.

A final point in this all too brief diatribe against irrationalism in politics: the strength of the EU is that it is capable of reaching institutional agreements about how to organize a society of 500 million Europeans; however it does not do well at all in reaching those millions of **individuals**. That is neither simple nor easy but we forget at our peril that those individuals are the voters that make Europe work – or fail to do so. The EU must do its utmost to get closer to its electorate however difficult that might seem. That is the only effective way to neutralize populism once and for all.

The problem with politics, Harold Macmillan once mused, was “events.” For nearly ten years now the EU has been racing wildly, with mixed success, to keep up with events that are out of hand. The divisions and acrimony associate with our discussions of the refugee crisis are perhaps the best example of events taking the upper hand in politics. The future of Europe lies precisely in getting those events and the myriad of other distressing events that we see virtually wherever we look under control. That will only be possible on the basis of effective collective leadership that will both bring effective management to cope with the problems and dilemmas we confront and at the same time dispel the fear and distrust that has been corroding European public life in the last ten years.