



## WAKE UP ... AND SMELL THE SMOKE (SCREEN)

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An EU outsider familiar with the problems facing the world today might be forgiven for feeling that they have arrived in a truly alien place on listening to the debates of insiders. The «European-ese» spoken in EU official and other circles and the tendency to create ever more complex labels and sub-labels to map the labyrinthine realities of European integration and cooperation has long been a source of entertaining jokes; and to British Tories, for instance, it is a sign of the encroachment of the “super-state mentality” on the individual freedom and initiative.

However, the above comment is not the opening line of a Euro-sceptic tirade, but rather of a deeper criticism of current debate within the EU; nor is it a comment that identifies with the most prominent displays of British *schadenfreude* in the wake of the very French *non*. And the criticism is this: European leaders, public officials and many specialists in European affairs appear to be curiously oblivious to reality. The debates one hears are reminiscent of those that take place within a Leninist democratic centralist party: one’s voice cannot be heard, one’s opinion makes no sense, unless it is framed within the pre-set boundaries of what is dogmatically assumed to be obvious; unless certain fundamentals of the doctrine are assumed to be beyond dispute. And the other side of the coin is that is one’s view uses a frame of



reference that is not based on conventional Euro-wisdom (for want of a better term), it is either completely ignored, misunderstood or, as in the old Leninist parties, as evidence of non-democratic inclinations and other, unsavoury, un-PC views.

From this state of affairs results the surprise and horror of many at the rejection of the European Constitution, a sentiment that is less understandable to those who inhabit the real world, and for whom such a rejection was all too predictable. Let us start with the Constitution itself. A reading of European reality tells us that the European «model» as it is called is under threat – the demise of its welfare states is a matter of when and not if given population aging and the non-competitive nature of the economies that surround and sustain it in a globalised economic world. Thus, the real challenge for Europeans is to create the conditions for a new social contract. And yet the EU constitution enshrines the very rights that we are likely to see extinguished in our lifetimes (pension rights, free universal health care and education, and so on). In other words, it is a constitution that nobody can believe in if they look at what is happening on the ground. And this is not to mention the impossible decision-making procedures and power hierarchies established by that document, which have been amply criticised by legal specialists.

The point is not that we do not need a constitution, nor is it that what has submitted to popular referendum is not really a constitution at all (such documents should be pocket sized and enshrine what is fundamental and eternal, not contingent and circumstantial); rather,



the point is that European leaders have expended immense energy and focus on a project that is not by any means the most relevant to people living in Europe. And the fact that they have had such difficulties in selling this project to the public is not a result of the natural ignorance of the common man, nor of the absence of «education» about Europe (whose advocates sound alarmingly like supporters of policies of political indoctrination), but of the fact that the European Constitution, the main project of the times, *does not respond to the concerns of ordinary citizens*. Europeans are concerned about declining living standards and the threat of changing economic realities to their way of life; they are worried about the many new forms of insecurity that plague them and other countries around them; about arms control, about the environment, about poverty, about sustainability or the nature of the economic model that will carry them into the future. In short, about the kinds of issues which present a real challenge to our way of organising our societies, our economies, and our politics, and that are now likely to have a clear impact on them in their lifetimes or those of their children.

And all this appears to be lost on European leaders locked as they appear to be – at least until very recently – in the circular logic of a particular ideological frame of reference in which the self-referential path of European «progress» is unquestionable. It is symptomatic of the lack of direction that the president of the European Commission should note that Europe is in need of a «great project», and that he should suggest that poverty in Africa could be that project, the one to mobilise



Europeans.<sup>1</sup> Independently of the debatable logic of *blanket* debt relief as espoused by Gordon Brown, it is highly unlikely that Europeans or anyone else but Africans for that matter, should be mobilised *primarily* by a project that is not of *direct* concern to themselves. This is not to say that Europeans are not capable of generosity (they are) and nor that we should not work towards the elimination of poverty (we should): but to suggest that this is the ideal project to mobilise a «European citizenry» is naïve at best.

There is one way in which the Commissioner is right however: Europe does need a great project, and it has a unique historical value-added (in contrast, say, with the US) that can be put to good use: its strong states with a tradition of unembarrassed public investment for social transformation. What should European states, in an alliance with the private sector, bet on as their «grand project»? There are various possibilities here (and a real debate about this would be much more useful than one about how to salvage the wreckage of the constitution): but I would like to suggest that the «grand project» we must invest in are resources: more specifically, water and energy. And more specifically on a grand project for a *Clean Europe*. A few statistics for the sceptical:

There is great dispute about the longevity of oil reserves as it is not known accurately what the earth's total supply of petroleum deposits is. However, according to the most optimistic calculus, the “world contains enough petroleum resources to last at least until the

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<sup>1</sup> Comments made during a debate with the leaders of European social science research networks held in Lisbon in June of this year.



year 2100.”<sup>2</sup> (The most pessimistic are 2025-2050). So at best, according to current optimistic scientific knowledge, another 95 years of oil use. And many agree with economist Robert Kaufman at Boston University (47 years old) when he says that: “In our lifetime we will have to deal with a peak in the supply of cheap oil.”<sup>3</sup>

And as regards water, a UN source: “Approximately one in three people live in regions of moderate to high water stress and it is estimated that two thirds of people will live in water stressed conditions by 2025 (WBGU 1999, UNEP 1999). Human demand and the misuse of water resources continue to grow. Intensive irrigation is placing steadily increasing pressure on aquifers and their ability to recharge, and reported incidences of groundwater and surface water contamination continues to rise. In large cities, total municipal and industrial uses of water have grown by 24 times in the last century and urban populations are expected to grow to 5 billion people by 2025. Some large-scale water infrastructure projects and an intensification and greater frequency of natural threats, such as flooding and droughts, are having a devastating impact on people’s livelihood and access to water. These pressures are also placing freshwater ecosystems and their associated species under enormous strain.”<sup>4</sup> As the UNEP, the World Bank and the World Resources Institute have said: “The world's thirst for water is likely to become one of the most pressing resource

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<sup>2</sup> David Deming, “Are we Running out of Oil”, *Policy Backgrounder* 159, 29 January 2003, National Centre for Policy Analysis. It should be noted that in contrast with what is being said here, Mr. Deming of the School of Geology and Geophysics of the University of Oklahoma feels that environmental doom saying is misplaced in light of this statistic. It is also fair to mention that various scientists take this position and feel that new technologies will resolve what is falsely claimed to be an eminent problem. However, this does not take into account the pollution generated by oil use.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Jim Appenzeller, in: “The End of Cheap Oil?”, *National Geographic Magazine*, June 2004.

<sup>4</sup> The sources are the German Advisory Council on Global Change and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), cited in “Freshwater: A Global Crisis of Water Security and Basic Water Provision”, Freshwater Environment Briefing Paper 1, Towards Earth Summit 2002.



issues of the 21st century [...] In some cases, water withdrawals are so high, relative to supply, that surface water supplies are literally shrinking and groundwater reserves are being depleted faster than they can be replenished by precipitation.”<sup>5</sup>

If the EU focuses its considerable weight and energy behind a project for the widespread adoption of alternative energy sources and prepares for water shortages with a project for the widespread use of renovated water resources (a scientifically feasible albeit politically challenging possibility)<sup>6</sup>, European citizens will not have to be educated about what Europe is for: it will be clear to them as they drive non-petroleum, non-polluting cars; as they use re-cycled water and see that water shortages, continued mass pollution, and an uncertain oil future are no longer problems; if they realize that even past foreign policy headaches are concomitantly mitigated and resolved by the concerted action and investment of their tax Euros. They will find it obvious that being «European» makes sense, because being European will be about combining national resources, making good use of the state and private enterprise, to produce real results in people’s lives.

The impact of such a policy would not be merely internal (cheaper energy, sustainability of domestic economies, and various other beneficial side effects): the success of such a grand project would have far reaching international implications. And for a Europe that has long

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in: Maude Barlow, *Blue Gold: The Global Water Crisis and the Commodification of the World's Water Supply*, Special Report of the International Forum on Globalisation (IFG).

<sup>6</sup> For a quick view of some of the possible technologies see, “Consider the Alternatives”, *The Economist*, 28 April 2005.



wished (and failed) to project itself as a major political player internationally, it would be one that would give it the kind of clout it can hope for: a political clout that comes from economic and scientific innovation, the historical source of European self-confidence. Think of a Europe that is in the lead vis-à-vis the US in terms of energy policy and non-dependence on oil;<sup>7</sup> think of an EU that can truly act as an impartial negotiator in the Middle East (since it will not be an interested oil-seeking party); think of an EU that can provide water renewal technologies to the many underdeveloped, water-starved countries of the world; think of an EU that can announce the end of the relevance of the Kyoto Protocol because there are alternative sources of energy that do not pose the problems Kyoto was created to address; think of what better international advertisement for sovereignty-sharing and multilateral norm creation (which is how the EU works on the inside) than a successful policy of this kind; and think of a globally competitive EU private and public sector that is a major global provider of clean energy technology and resources or, at the very least, of a Clean Europe that is a model for others to emulate.

This is an inspiring project. And it is one that forces us to think about real «in life-time» problems, including the question of how to address globalisation and how to position oneself vis-à-vis the neo-

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<sup>7</sup> Despite the Bush administration's faith in oil autonomy and its disdain for developing alternative energies, as the Economist reports, "America will never achieve energy "independence", given that it consumes a quarter of the world's oil but has less than 3% of its proven reserves. A boost to its output will make little difference to the global energy equation, and its energy plan does little to encourage greater fuel economy in cars or gas-guzzling sport-utility vehicles." As this article also reports, concerted government action can yield positive results, as shown by the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) law, "which between 1978 and 1987 produced an improvement of over two-fifths in the average fuel efficiency of new American-made cars. Between 1977 and 1985, the volume of America's net oil imports fell by nearly half even as its economy grew by a quarter." The article goes on to quote a specialist who believes that "this broke OPEC's pricing power for a decade. The world enjoyed low and stable oil prices in the late 1980s and much of the 1990s." (See note 5 for source).



liberal vs. state interventionist dichotomy (a false one if ever there was a false dichotomy).

Obviously, having a great project does not mean that all other concerns are ignored: Europeans want strong democracies, they want human rights, they want arms control, they want social equity and the issue of how to address the challenges of economic globalisation is a complex and multifaceted one that is not exhausted by a «grand resource policy»; but one cannot have more than one grand project at a time, and there must be a unifying focus that make sense of all policy-making.

When Francis Fukuyama announced the end of history and when it was announced that from now on life on the planet would be about spreading free markets and democracy around the world, most thinking people rejected the proposition as a-historical and essentially ideological. And yet... European leaders have been behaving as though it were true, only to be rudely awakened by the growing power of the right, the popular rejection of «globalisation» and its social costs, the rise of Islamic extremism with its new vindication of an authoritarian or totalitarian order. The end of history focus on free markets and democracy – regardless of circumstances and usually applied to the Other – is equally inadequate to deal with what are complex and multi-layered social, economic and political challenges the world over. Again, it is not that we should not support the seeds of democracy or that we should support the authoritarian status quo; but rather that we cannot make this the focus of our thinking about the world. And it is not that



the market should be rejected, but rather that to think in such dichotomous terms is reductive and self-defeating.

Paradoxically, this end of history blindness has been accompanied by continued resort by leaders and political parties to the pre-end of history dichotomous rhetoric of the Cold War: lean states and free markets, or strong states and protectionism. States can be lean and strong, and it may be convenient for markets to be selectively free and protected, depending on long-term strategic project. For Europe, which is not the birthplace of American liberal capitalism, such thinking is an impediment to a productive alliance between states and private sectors; it stands as an obstacle to addressing real issues and challenges. A European grand project is necessary indeed. It must be based on *material* interests that give rise to a new politics, it cannot walk on the paper stilts of the European Constitution, to abuse Bentham's critique of natural rights; it must use material resources to produce *material results that will translate into political and normative gains*; and it must be generous to European citizens as this is the only way that Europe can hope to be generous with and influential in the world.