

"The EU isn't working: how should it change?"

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"Europe has broken down!" Our only hope seems either to call for repairs or ditch it by the side of the road and start walking. This is because some see the European Union as a complex machine. If regulations are pouring out of the European Parliament, if candidate countries are lining up to become members and if national governments are agreeing to budgets and treaties then it is running smoothly. When they are not it is broken and needs mending, or in some minds abandoning altogether.

Yet such an analogy is flawed. The Union is not a mechanical institution that sputters but an organic one that is evolving. Viewed in this light the binary perception of the EU that grades progress in terms of 'success' or 'failure' reveals territory in between; a space the EU has in fact inhabited since the beginning.

The history of the European Union demonstrates this resemblance to a living organism that learns from its mistakes, rather than a contraption that needs tweaking. The episodes surrounding the Maastricht and Nice treaties provided plenty of food for thought to the European Commission and national governments; no doubt the same will happen in the wake of the Constitution. Yet the EU never stopped working. Instead, it adapted and moved on.

It must continue to do so in quickly changing surroundings: rising nationalist movements in member states; the adapting dangers of terrorism and transnational crime; and, economic threats from India and the Far East. It is only now that it is emerging as a global actor after fifty years of adolescence. As it takes on greater responsibilities on the international stage it will need to develop the capacity to carry them out.

It is for these reasons that the EU must embrace change. Yet it cannot be made by European institutions alone. National governments must also face the challenges that will dominate their agendas in the next few decades. Not only are populations aging, but economic performance across the board has been falling relative to the US, the 'Asian tigers', China and India.

The Lisbon Agenda's goal to make the EU a hub of innovation is critical for Europe to stay competitive, draw in investment and create jobs. Yet current trends suggest that prospects are dim. This is partly due to a failure of the European Commission. The EC does not, however, have the powers to accomplish the Agenda; these lie with national governments who set the goal themselves in 2000.

The European Union also appears out-dated with its heavy support for the agricultural sector. Although the CAP has had its funding reduced since the heady days of the post-war period, the forty per cent slice of the budget and associated trade-distorting regulations only hinder Europe's attempts to transform itself. Agriculture, and for some culture and identity, do not have to suffer from reform. National initiative and political will are the only forces that

can make this change. Capping farm subsidies so that large wealthy farmers do not benefit more than poor ones, combined with allowing national governments to subsidise their own farmers if they feel it necessary, will go a long way to realigning the EU budget along parameters that reflect the Continent's priorities for the future.

The idea of Subsidiarity therefore needs to be given more credence. Projects and regulations need only be made at a European level if cooperation benefits the participants, or if competition profits the consumer. Europe need not become a monolithic superstructure directed from the centre. Such an edifice would prove incredibly unwieldy and inflexible. Instead, numerous national centres of power should crystallise into a set of interconnecting nodes that coordinate their activity.

The European Union is at its most effective when it integrates sections of society and sovereignty that benefit from larger cooperation and competition. This argument is expounded by Mark Leonard in his conception of a 'Network Europe'. It eschews the assumptions that the EU can only be a free trade area or a federalist state. In their place is recognised a system of networks that provide the benefits of both worlds: increased productivity and growth from competition at a European level, as well as improved social mechanisms at national and local levels, like in health or crime, that come from cooperation and exchange of ideas through European institutions.

These institutions and programmes would promote cross-border learning so that national governments, as well as students, could gain the most from a larger pool of experience and education. Parallel regulations would free the exchange of goods and ideas across the Continent, stoking efficiencies and competitiveness. Expanding the Common Market through the Services Directive would be a start in this direction.

Yet it is a psychological handicap that stifles this organic Union. Functional relationships between national leaders are crucial for the continued running of the EU. This is shown by the animosity existent between Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac, as well as the negotiating skills of Angela Merkel. One measure for assuring that the EU works better is to simply wait for the next generation of European politicians. That is no guarantee, however. A better method is for the EU and, importantly, member states to implement more effective public diplomacy in support of the Union. There will be no need for propaganda, simply the better provision of information on what the EU does, who and how it benefits people, along with problems faced and how to remedy them.

While the people learn more about the EU, governments need to stop feeding contradictory information. It remains paradoxical that Chirac can simultaneously be one of Europe's longest standing proponents while blaming Brussels for the economic and social travails he faces from Paris. Yet his is not a singular case and can be found wherever politician and opportunism conspire to meet.

The British press perform the same role, pushing anti-European stories that often lack veracity or are only a fraction of the truth. The press should be prepared to investigate and criticise wasteful EU practices, yet also inform the public of beneficial developments that concern them. One indicator of the lack of adequate information reaching the public is the fact that many tabloids or regional papers do not post reporters to Brussels. The result of decades of Euroscepticism from the press has created an 'us' and 'them' mentality that hinders British acceptance that they are part of Europe.

The European 'elites', however, will never be able to impose a European identity. Individuals view themselves with varying levels of identity, but a supra-national one will take time to develop. In the meantime reforms should continue so that when Brits and Finns alike see themselves as European there will be something for them to be proud of: a more transparent and less corrupt European Parliament; better leadership through longer Presidencies; a Budget to reflect the realities of the Union; and, presence as a global influence and a force for good in the world.

The European Union has a great deal of potential. So much so that other trading blocks, like ASEAN, stay attentive of developments and copy what works. While to some the EU may seem to have stalled, it has simply stopped for breath as it pioneers new political mechanisms and creates fresh perspectives on ideas of sovereignty. Now that it begins to move again the EU will continue to evolve. There will be no need for one view to dominate or for an 'elite' to direct or lead. Instead, a network will perform the job of delivering what people want from the EU, with coordination through European institutions, and giving the EU a single voice to project its common interests across the globe.