

THE NEW EUROPE - EPP BACKS PRODI

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In an interview with the Süddeutsche Zeitung, EU Enlargement Commissioner Günther VERHEUGEN, a close friend of Germany's Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard SCHRÖDER, caused a furore by implying that public support for the next round of enlargement would best be achieved by a referendum. Denounced on all sides, not least by Commission President Romano PRODI, Verheugen subsequently called the remark "my flop of the year". EPP News analyses the confusing debacle and its implications.

GOING TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER



Against the background of the furore over an unguarded newspaper interview by Enlargement Commissioner Günther VERHEUGEN, the EPP this week took the lead in re-affirming the agreements on EU enlargement reached at Helsinki last December, and on 2003 as the target date for new members. Flanked by Commission President Romano PRODI, Verheugen appeared at Strasbourg to eat his words.

He reaffirmed his - and the Commission's - commitment to enlargement, and for this to be as rapid, "and as deep", as possible. EPP-ED Group leader Hans-Gert PÖTTERING told Parliament following the statement: "The enlargement of the European Union is the make-or-break issue for the European continent in the 21st century, and it is clear that Parliament and Commission must go in the same direction and insist vis-à-vis governments that the European Council of Nice in December is a success."

The paradoxical effect of the Verheugen affair, and of the EPP's clear stand, may now be to concentrate political minds on the stalled Intergovernmental Conference due to conclude at Nice in December. Its central task is to deal with the mis-named "leftovers of Amsterdam", unresolved issues which go to the heart of the debate. Among them: will each Member State continue to have a right to one Commissioner, with two Commissioners for the largest States? What of the weighting of votes in the Council - now deliberately tilted against bigger countries? To what extent can unanimity realistically continue to apply in decision-making?

So far, signs are that the Verheugen affair has galvanised European political leaders. Far from endorsing his position, Chancellor Schröder said the EU would be ready for new members by 2003. "It's then up to the candidate countries to decide, by their own efforts, when they are ready to join," he said at a meeting of German ambassadors in Berlin. Foreign minister Joschka FISCHER also insisted on rapid enlargement. There should be a kind of "road map" by the end of this year, and the first group, including Poland, should be members by the beginning of 2005 - "if possible, earlier." As for a referendum, this was "completely unacceptable."

CONSPIRACY OR SLIP OF THE TONGUE ?

One of the most experienced of the 20 Commissioners, Günther VERHEUGEN, 56, (left) must have been well aware of the likely impact of his frank interview with the influential



Süddeutsche Zeitung. Published last Saturday, it caused uproar among the 15 EU foreign ministers meeting in Evian at the weekend.

The most controversial passage relates to his view that enlargement risks being seen as an elitist project. The "mistake we made with the euro", he said, of introducing it "over the heads of the people", must not be repeated, he said. Asked if he was proposing a referendum, he replied that there should be referendums where it was a matter of changing the character of the state, for instance if it was giving up sovereignty. "Certainly, such referendums bring risks. But I am for them. They force the elites to deal with European politics at home as well, and to confront people's worries. So far that has not been the case."

Once trouble started - beginning with a furious telephone call from Commission President PRODI - he claimed he was speaking in a purely German context, and for himself alone. Verheugen in his interview did emphasize that enlargement was an historic opportunity, and in Germany's interests, and that the Commission wanted most applicants in by 2005. But there was widespread suspicion that his real intention was to delay the whole enlargement process. Why and in whose interest?

One of the brightest of the 20 Commissioners, he had previously been a junior foreign minister and also federal party manager of the SPD. He enjoys a close friendship with party leader and Chancellor Gerhard SCHRÖDER. German opinion polls show widespread popular fears of a flood of cheap labour from Eastern Europe. At the same time, the extreme Right is a growing problem. Was the idea of a referendum being tested out? Did the whole debacle result from kite-flying on behalf of Chancellor Schröder?

MARTENS - "RISK OF RETURN TO PRE-1989"

"Some points Mr Verheugen raises are of course entirely valid," said EPP President Wilfried MARTENS (*right*). "We do need to win the broad consent of European people for enlargement. And yes, he was right to insist that the Member States cannot place the whole burden for such consensus-building on the Commission. But overall, especially the suggestion of a referendum, it is difficult to interpret his words in any other way than party political game-playing, no doubt with an eye to the German elections in 2002. It is intolerable to play party politics with the enlargement portfolio, and irresponsible.



"Verheugen knows, as everyone does, that to hold 15 different national referendums on each applicant state is unworkable. The whole enlargement process would in practice grind to a halt. So would the European Union, at a critical moment in its evolution. We would be back with a divided Europe, as if the Cold War has never ended. It is already 10 years since Communism ended, and we do not have a single new member from the former Comecon countries. To delay things beyond 2003, the date agreed by the EPP at its summit in Porto, would be a monumental failure of historical responsibility." It also risked provoking further euroscepticism in the candidate countries - notably in the largest, Poland, with 40m people - which was feeding on the slowness of the IGC negotiations. "It is vital that the people of the new countries are made genuinely welcome," he said.

Martens said he was generally "dubious" about referendums. "Governments are elected to govern, and should have the courage to take the decisions they are elected to take. As

Verheugen points out, the post-war German constitution banned this kind of referendum. With reason. They are a gift to populists and demagogues."

Despite the Verheugen row, the SPD and the Greens are to campaign for a change in the constitution to allow greater use of referendums. The initiative is being driven by SPD Secretary-General Franz MÜNTEFERING, who argues: "Our democracy is now so stable that we can be more open and more liberal,". The Christian Democratic Union has signalled its opposition; it can block the necessary two-thirds Bundestag majority needed for the change.

In brief...

In the Yugoslav presidential elections campaign, the main Serb opposition candidate, the moderate nationalist lawyer **Vojislav KOSTUNICA** (*right*), has a clear lead, with 43% in the polls, against President Slobodan MILOSEVIC's 21%, according to a survey in late August by the Belgrade-based Centre for Policy Studies. The survey found opposition supporters firm in their choices, but doubtful of the outcome, fearing election fraud or violence. There has been a sharp increase in shootings and mysterious disappearances. There are also fears of an attack on Montenegro, the pro-Western junior partner in the Yugoslav federation, which is boycotting the elections. Last weekend, Hubert VEDRINE indicated on behalf of all 15 members of the EU - currently imposing sanctions on Serbia - that victory for democracy would lead to a radical revision of EU policy "in all its aspects." The elections are on September 24.

