

IGC - NEED FOR "LEADERSHIP AND IMAGINATION"

Brussels, September 29, 2000

The Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) under the current French presidency is reported to be stalling. Its task is to agree on radical changes to the Treaty to prepare the EU for the next round of enlargement. France has been accused of flagrantly putting its national interests before those of the Union as a whole. The EU has set up a free trade zone for the Balkans.

MARTENS SOUNDS WARNING NOTE

In a message to a conference on the IGC hosted by the EPP's Greek party, Nea Dimokratia, on Friday (29/09) EPP President Wilfried MARTENS expressed "real concern" about the progress of negotiations, and said the Union as a whole appeared to be at a crossroads:

"It is nearly October," Martens said. "Why has the French presidency not yet made clearer advances - in fact any clear advance at all, as far as I can see - in the IGC ? By the time of the Nice Summit in a few weeks the 15 are supposed to have agreed on really profound changes to the institutions..."



"There is always an element of panic at this stage, in part artificial. This time, I cannot disguise real concern. The whole tone of the IGC discussions is taking place in a political 'ambiance' which fills me with misgiving. At best, I fear, we will be confronted with compromises which only confuse matters: which are not compromises at all but obfuscations. I speak from experience: this does not work.

"I am not referring to the headline disputes, such as over the so-called, mis-named 'leftovers of Amsterdam'. How many Commissioners - 20? 30? 10?. Frankly, on that subject I would be surprised if eventually there is agreement on anything less than one Commissioner per country.

"Creeping Intergovernmentalism"

"But the more serious underlying point is the future character of the Commission, its internal balance, and above all its capacity to act effectively. This is a severely practical point. It is not being taken properly into account.

"In the last few weeks, notably over the fuel crisis, we have seen just how badly weakened Europe has become by creeping intergovernmentalism. That too feeds into the currency. The weakness of the euro is not connected with the European economy, which is doing fine, but with the markets' sense of a lack of leadership in Europe. Are the markets wrong about that?"

"Three weeks ago the 15 finance ministers met at Versailles, and an announcement was made that each government would make no change in fuel taxes 'for economic and environmental reasons'.

One by one, starting with France, the position slipped away in concessions large and small which make a mockery of a concerted energy policy.

"I can only agree with the former Competition Commissioner Karel van MIERT, speaking in Brussels last week: 'Common policies are not working. The presidency is not acting as it should. The Commission is not allowed to take a lead.' That, alas, how it is. Europe's hard-fought credibility is at risk...More than ever, Europe needs strong, European-minded politicians to drive things forward. It also needs a tough, properly-supported Commission."

Strong Commission "Essential"

The EPP could for the moment boast of only three prime ministers among the 15," Martens said. "But we are stronger than that, because we are the guardians - more than those who have borrowed or adapted our ideas - of the essential vision of a united Europe.

"Looked at from an historical perspective, say in 10 or 20 years time, it will seem very strange that - more than a decade after the end of Communism - the Union still does not have a single member from the New Europe. Should we be surprised at growing euroscepticism in candidate countries? It is surely vital that the people of the new countries are made genuinely welcome - as Greece was, not so very long ago.

"Many European leaders are now so caught up with the small change of power politics that they seem not to notice the spectre over us: the slow disintegration of everything we have made, perhaps even a new division of Europe, as if the Cold War has never ended.

"Enlargement is the political, moral, human imperative of our time. It is a historical responsibility. We, the European People's Party, need to show that we at least can grasp this great historical challenge, and to be practical and courageous about bringing this New Europe to birth."

The obstinate "Amsterdam leftovers"

"In-depth reform of the Commission is essential, given the complexity of the challenges we have to face. It will mean a complete rethinking of our working methods." (Romano Prodi, Commission President, speech to European Parliament 15/02/00)

The IGC which culminated in the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) made progress on a whole series of contentious areas, including the "communitisation" of Third Pillar issues like visa policy, asylum, immigration, and external frontier arrangements. The 1999 Tampere Summit tied up some more loose ends: abolishing formal extradition procedures, and establishing the principle of mutual recognition of judicial decisions and of evidence in legal cases.

But three central institutional changes, often referred to as the "Amsterdam Leftovers" - remain obstinately unresolved. Without a clear solution, enlargement risks making the EU institutions incoherent and ineffective. The three "leftover" issues are: the arithmetic of the Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) threshold ; the reweighting of votes in the Council

for a Union which has a majority of smaller countries; the number and responsibilities of Commissioners.

It is becoming clear (see EPP News 25) that the "leftovers" go to the heart of the debate about the future of Europe. That in part lies behind the unwillingness of most EU Member States to go much beyond the minimum reforms that are needed.

In brief...

After eight years of negotiations, Albania has become the 138th member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The move was blocked for months over disagreements between the EU and the US about import restrictions on films and tv programmes. The EU has also announced that it is to set up a free trade zone for agricultural and industrial products from Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, and Macedonia.