



EPP NEWS

EUROPE AND THE 20c T-SHIRT

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Over the summer, globalisation erupted as the big issue confronting not only Europe, but the whole planet. The hyperbole, and sometimes violent protests (see EPP News 17) challenge what is seen as a sinister 'Anglo-Saxon' conspiracy behind every unwelcome development in modern life, from standardised fast food to the destruction of rain forests to a vague feeling of unhappiness. Are the protests traditional anti-Americanism in a new form? Symptoms of a more general malaise? Is there a fundamentally new problem? If so, what is to be done about it? EPP News interviews EPP President Wilfried MARTENS.

EPP News: *Globalisation is nothing new?*

Wilfried Martens: Of course not. But it is a matter of degree, and of the speed of change. The railways were the engine of globalisation in the 19th century, and in effect destroyed the Habsburg empire, which in 1914 was still essentially rural and feudal. The digital revolution is far more rapid and corrosive. And truly global. The end of the Cold War has also speeded up the process.

EPPN: *So it is understandable that people feel helpless, exposed...*

WM: In many ways they are! Take a very simple example: T-shirts. In China, which has evolved a system you could describe as tanks-with-capitalism, a T-shirt can be produced for about 20 US cents. In Mexico, the same product costs about 1\$ to produce - no doubt because Mexican workers do not accept to work a 15-hour day, seven days a week, and also expect - and need - to earn more than 20\$ or 25\$ a month. Everything is made worse by American importers passing off Chinese T-shirts as US-made. The same thing is happening with tennis shoes and all sorts of other goods.

EPPN: *So it is not surprising that Mexico has become the implacable opponent of China joining the World Trade Organisation.*

WM: Not at all surprising. This particular skirmish incidentally points up the difference between NAFTA, a free-trade area, and the European Union.

EPPN: *Europeans are less squeamish about protectionism?*

WM: A neo-liberal would probably put it like that. But I see it like this: that we are building a political Union, not a mere free-trade area. Why? Because only if Europe is politically effective - and can speak with one voice about what concerns the Union as a whole - can it be in a position to protect what is worth protecting. The European 'social market economy' to which the EPP is committed is

emphatically not code for trade protectionism. But, yes, it is a way of protecting a way of life.

EPPN: *Liberal economists would dismiss the phrase 'social market economy' as an alibi for holding on to unaffordable, out-of-date welfare systems...*

WM: Which is only the small change of ideological polemic. No-one disputes that welfare systems need to be efficient, and cost-effective. Nor that deregulation is often essential to ensure European companies remain competitive. But a civilised society looks after its poor, just as it opens its education system to everyone, and ensures basic standards. No doubt there are people who believe that Europeans are more inclined than Mexicans to work seven days a week to produce 20c T-shirts. However, I have not met them...Fortunately we have a choice.

EPPN: *Which is what? Are you thinking of the Tobin Tax? [The proposal to tax cross-frontier capital transfers, being promoted by French Prime Minister Lionel JOSPIN as a response to the wave of anti-globalisation feeling in France]*

WM: The Tobin Tax is probably unworkable, even if the original impulse behind it is sensible enough. It would in practice usher in even worse trade disputes with the US. These are bad enough already, over GM crops, European meat, punitive tariffs on Roquefort cheese...Jospin must know all that. I think this is French gesture politics, part of a game which Jospin thinks will help him in next year's presidential elections. And it may fob off some protesters. But it is not a solution.

EPPN: *Which is?*

WM: Not something that can be expressed in a slogan. It



goes to the roots. It is a matter of deciding who we are, what we want, and being logical and realistic about our political choices. That was the spirit of the EPP's last Congress paper [*A Union of Values*]. As I said, we do have choices. In economic terms, the European Union is already a market of 365m people, a single market...

EPPN: *Larger than the US market.*

WM: And once the Union is enlarged it will be a great deal larger. But the danger is evidently that if we are not vigilant it will *only* be a market, and the Union will be seen - justifiably perhaps - as the source of economically logical but painful reform. Reform implemented without real concern for anything that matters apart from the trade figures, so in effect the not-very-secret agent of globalisation! In some ways I agree with [former French prime minister] Edouard Balladur. He said in 1993: "What is the market? It is the law of the jungle, the law of nature. And what is civilisation? It is the struggle against nature." Of course it is a simplification....

EPPN: *Because this 'force of nature' is now out of control? Governments are too weak...?*

WM: Often they are. Which is why the strong government of Vicente FOX [*President of Mexico*] is such a positive development. In Europe, in the Union, we have a choice not to be weak - in fact to be very strong indeed. And insofar as the US does represent unthinking, 'Anglo-Saxon' neo-liberalism, we are in a position to confront it, to go down a quite different track. As Europeans. As a civilisation. The precondition is to build a political Europe, a genuinely democratic Europe which is able to achieve consensus. At the moment that project is half-finished, and some of the builders are losing their nerve...

EPPN: *You are referring to the rise of nationalism and euroscepticism?*

WM: The problem goes deeper than that. Look at the reaction of Jospin to [French peasants' leader] José BOVÉ. It is essentially fear. Bové is a practised demagogue and rabble-rouser, busy destroying experimental GM crop plantations and vandalising MacDonalds. I wonder if he can remember when he last milked a ewe! The establishment doesn't dare touch him, or even criticise him. Why not? Because the unspoken truth is that the political elites, in France but not only there, are afraid. The people - even those with plenty to lose - are fed up with them.

EPPN: *Where does this sourness come from?*

WM: With rare exceptions, the elites are more and more reluctant to lead, to take responsibility. Tony BLAIR with his prevarications over the euro is a typical example. The main obsession is opinion polls and the results of focus groups, as if these so-called leaders were supermarket managers selling washing-powder. Leadership is an unfashionable world. But without it how can there be dialogue? What point can it have? It is like proposing a conversation with a computer.

EPPN: *And this dialogue should lead where?*

WM: To workable policies, evidently, expressed in language which people can understand. As far as possible without slogans and manipulations. People accuse the political class of corruption. I don't think it's any more corrupt than it ever was. Possibly less so. My accusation is different. Politicians have become unserious. That, in the end, is what has created the inchoate, Utopian, anti-globalisation movement which now troubles the big political shows, as at Genoa. Anti-globalisation is a rag-bag of different, often contradictory concerns, some of them entirely legitimate. Others are atavistic, infantile, and in some cases near-criminal. Taken as a whole, the movement is as directionless as was the mood of 1968 - which, it should be remembered, led nowhere very much.

An authentically political Europe - a European democracy - would be in a position to examine what parts of this movement are real and have a constituency. Concern for the global environment, for instance, and for human rights. The grandiose machinations of the multinationals which are currently costing thousands of jobs - to no obvious benefit even to the companies themselves. We can and to some extent do regulate these things. Bio-engineering. Cloning. We need to debate all of these issues in a serious way, reach a consensus, and then formulate policies.

That also means learning from the past. As you said, globalisation is not new. Very few things are. We used to speak about the 'social partners'. Now might be the moment to re-establish such social partners, and belatedly start a dialogue between them. But with a mob as at Genoa or Göteborg, few conversations are possible.

EPPN: *You are in effect talking about reinforcing civil society?*

WM: That was our central message to the Communist countries when they freed themselves. It was good advice. But we seem to have forgotten it for ourselves. Civil society needs to be as strong as possible. How? By inclusion. By a genuine spirit of democracy, not lip-service to it. Which means, for instance, that the political parties must become, again, something other than virtually identical machines for winning elections and marketing empty slogans. They also need to be more than structures in which political apparatchiks advance their careers. As things stand, ordinary people are terribly discouraged from taking any part in political life.

EPPN: *Is your ideal of a 'political Europe' in prospect?*

WM: I hope so. The inspiration has always been there, from the beginning. I have confidence that the Laeken conference [at the end of Belgium's EU presidency in December 2001] is in a position to steer the Union back in a more promising and creative direction...I am even happy to admit that Monsieur Bové and the travelling anti-globalisation circus have delivered a useful jolt to the system.

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