



“THE ACCEPTANCE OF AMSTERDAM”

Article for The House Magazine

6 June 1997

The successful signature of the Treaty of Amsterdam will be significant progress in the smallest of the three tasks which Europe has set itself in the 1990s, but it is small beer by comparison with the “Great Enlargement” and the continuing struggle over a credible Single Currency. In these last days before the Summit it is surprisingly easy to predict the general shape of the outcome, despite the agonies of extended preparation and the uncertainties of changes of government. No doubt there will be the usual ritual last minute drama. Foreign ministers will be left to tidy up the loose ends and everyone knows that ratification is the real test. Nevertheless the event is of sufficient importance to be commemorated in one of those splendidly pompous murals that adorn the walls of most Parliaments. Flamboyantly dressed figures, wreathed in smiles, clasping a draft of the Treaty should be painted in the style of the Dutch Masters and entitled “The Acceptance of Amsterdam”.

The outcome of negotiations will, of course, enrage Bill Cash and will equally deeply disappoint Euro-enthusiasts on the Continent. It will not include any great extension of European competence, and it will not mark an irreversible shift towards the end of the nation-state. It will not complete the institutional changes needed to operate the thirty states Union which may exist in twenty years time. However, it will mark a useful consolidation and clarification of the existing treaties and it should be accepted by both government and opposition in Westminster.

While I think that useful progress will be made, I do not believe that Amsterdam will produce a truly Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Indeed we may continue to suffer from a situation where we have the worst of both worlds - a policy with a title that frightens Euro-sceptics, without delivering the promised benefits. As usual we need to be careful about words. We are talking about a common policy, not a single policy. We understand that distinction when we talk about a single currency rather than a common currency running in parallel with national currencies. All too often the debate is conducted as though we were considering the construction of a super-state on the model of the USA, with a single foreign policy. We are seeking a common policy to do those things which the Member States are incapable of doing by themselves.

Viewed in the proper historical perspective, we are making substantial progress. Twenty years ago our inability to act together in foreign policy matters was not regarded as surprising or culpable. Ten years ago we felt guilty about our failure. Five years ago we had developed aspirations and rhetoric, but had neither institutions nor ground rules. After Maastricht we had some mechanisms, but we have not been good at using them. Most worrying is the impact on our publics of our failure, both political and technical, in the wars of Yugoslav succession. They expected us to act to save lives and we largely failed. We raised expectations and then dashed them.

So at Amsterdam we need to learn the lessons of past failure. We do need a face for our foreign policy - a “pesc-person” and a stronger troika. We do need greater planning and analysis. Above all we do need the ability to act - which ultimately means the ability to intervene militarily. Such CFSP progress urgently needs a parliamentary dimension both national and European. I do not accept that the governments of Europe can continue to rigorously exclude parliamentarians.

The ratification of the Treaty provides few problems for Mr Blair. His well disciplined troops will perform their usual excessively long march through the lobby. The situation is more challenging for the Tories. Intelligent opposition requires choice about what to oppose. It requires a sense of timing to understand what the issues will be by the time of the next nationwide electoral test in June 1999. By then many traditionally divisive issues, such as a modest extension of qualified majority voting, more co-decision for the European Parliament or a fudged majority voting system for the CFSP, will already be history. In many areas a Conservative Government with a majority proof against its Eurosceptics would have struck much the same deal as the Labour Government is now doing. This is clear for instance on the question of the incorporation of Schengen and the recognition of Britain’s special status

as an island. A Conservative Government had more to demand of its partners and therefore the logic of negotiation suggests that it might have conceded, at the very least, much the same amount of limited constitutional advance as has been traded by the current British Government.

It is my belief that both the nation and the Conservative Party would benefit from a period of bi-partisanship on many matters European. The Conservative opposition should preserve its ferocity for the two areas where the Labour government will prove to be weakest - issues of competitiveness globally and the shape of British defence policy in Europe after the savagery of the upcoming Treasury-driven Defence Review.



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