

“EUROPE’S AUTUMN?”

ECPA Briefing

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It is an odd quirk of the British character that the summer of 2005 will be remembered for winning the right to stage the Olympics and beating the Australians at cricket, rather than for terrorist bombs in the London Underground. September was traditionally the time for war in Europe once the harvest was gathered in. We should rejoice that in September 2005 there are no wars in the European space. This is not to underestimate the importance of fundamentalist terrorism and the potential radicalisation of Islamic populations north of the Mediterranean, however good public affairs practice requires that we regularly step back from the headlines and search for underlying patterns. Behind the hubbub of national and European debate there is an affluent, creative, re-united and increasingly mature Europe. Maybe it does not have the fresh, vibrant spring-like colours of a new idea, but in compensation it has something of the mellow elegance of early autumn. We should recognise the strengths of European integration as well as its recurring crises.

Rudyard Kipling observed that “He who only England knows, knows her not at all”. The same can be said for Europe. As a child of the Atlantic I spend much of my time striving to explain one shore to the other. For many years now the ECPA has co-operated closely with the Public Affairs Council in Washington. In November I have been asked to open their “Public Affairs in Brussels” conference, which is sub-titled “Success Strategies in the European Union” in Washington. Since the French and Dutch referenda much American opinion has swung back to a ‘Europe is in crisis’ stance. This was perhaps best summed up by an American student of mine who announced “Your Constitution has been rejected; you have lost your nerve on enlargement; you have no budget. Should I be planning for collapse of the European Union?” My response to such over-reaction is always to explain that Europe advances by two steps forward and one back. Crises are the evolutionary mechanism by which Europe tests the validity of its development.

There is an interesting difference in the meta-programmes which underpin European and American thought patterns. Meta-programmes are the stories we tell each other to make sense of our actions. According to Bandler and Grinder, the creators of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), individuals communicate using consistent structures of language which over time can be recognised by their repeating patterns and the comfort which they give. When these language patterns are not aligned people get confused and find it difficult to understand each other. Americans are traditionally portrayed as the great optimists, but their striving is all too often based on a congenital fear of failure which leads to over-reaction. Europeans by contrast

would seem to have an innate confidence in their own capacity and creativity which can lead to a smugness that bewilders and infuriates Americans.

The one aspect of American criticisms of Europe with which I have sympathy is the slowness of economic and social reform in Germany, France and Italy, but even this can be over-stated. By any historical standard these countries at the heart of Europe are still successful economies and societies. They are all three in the throes of a generational leadership change. Just as their social structures and understanding of European integration was deeply rooted in the experience of European civil war and social unrest, so is it correspondingly difficult for them to find domestic consensus to move forward. The inconclusive German election result can stand as a case study in this regard. Parallels with Britain's winter of discontent are not valid. The electorates of Germany, France and Italy lack the sense of desperation that fuelled the Conservative victory of 1979. Anglo Saxons usually under-estimate the resilience and strength of these cultures who persist in talking to themselves in languages other than English. It is in this context that Ted Heath's death this summer, aged 89, should give us pause for thought. He drove through British membership of the European Union with a passion that came from personal memory of war in Europe. With a similar intensity he took on, however unsuccessfully, the dragons of trades union power and slack jawed management. Much more than he would have wanted to admit, his struggles laid the foundations for Margaret Thatcher's achievements. I can personally testify to his charm and intelligence over a dinner table. He had a fascination with ideas that made him deeply suspect in the eyes of the English. He thought big thoughts, such as the future of Europe in the world, that were ahead of his time and for which he was regularly mocked. His recognition that Europe's future would be determined as much by its relationship with Asia as by its traditional linkages across the Atlantic rendered him suspect in the eyes of eurosceptics and atlanticists alike. In his life he embodied the transition from a Europe driven by its internal demons to one sculpted by its external competition.

Having spent much of the last four months teaching the Decision Mapping® techniques created by Richard Hodapp of The Mapping Alliance, I am struck by the need for Europe to put itself through such a rigorous analysis. Decision Mapping® involves, amongst much else, an intense surveying of the external environment of a company or country. In a world of constrained resources it seeks to identify which decisions made by customers, competitors or regulators are crucial to the process of an organisation's adaptation to change. It asks deceptively simple questions. Who has a role in the decisions that we wish to influence? What is the scope of these decisions? What is their decision making process? And perhaps the most challenging question, "How do we intend to engage in that process?" In the context of geopolitics these are the questions which Europe needs to ask about its relationships with China, India, Russia and perhaps above all with the USA.

I am not usually a great fan of Thomas Friedman of "The Lexus and the Olive Tree" fame. However his latest book on globalisation, "The World is Flat", is exceptionally good. He argues that while the world was obsessed with the consequences of September 11th, we shifted into a third and decisive phase of globalisation. He quotes the technological reasons for this such as the growth of the internet empowering individuals to act globally, whereas previously only companies could operate effectively at this level. He eloquently traces the cumulative impact of unrelated

decisions in Russia, India and China, which have added upwards of two billion new consumers to the global economy. Perhaps most significantly he draws a comparison between the railway boom in nineteenth century America and the dot.com bubble of the late twentieth century. He demonstrates how the Indians are the winners in a world where cheap to use fibre optic cabling, an infrastructure paid for by the lemmings of the dot.com hysteria, has successfully interacted with previous Indian investment in English speaking IT skills. His overall message is that Europe and America no longer have the fifteen-year lead that they assumed was theirs by right.

As the European Union pauses for thought in the autumnal sunlight, it must give as much time to considering its opportunities in external process as it traditionally has to perfecting its internal content. This is a time for reflection in which to draw on the healing normality of Europe's successes to date. The German electoral dead heat cements in place the much talked about 'pause for reflection'. Nothing new can, or should, happen until 2008. By then leadership on both sides of the Atlantic will have been renewed. The next two steps forward need to take place around the European election of 2009 and to draw their legitimacy from that election. I doubt that the outrageous failures of American government in New Orleans will really lead to a systemic change, but we may at least expect new faces and a course correction. Call centres in Bangalore and European ports stuffed with Chinese bras are but the early indications of the world in which Europe must now make its way. Of course we should be tidying up some of the mess, for instance telling the Turks the truth that they will never be members, but Commissioner Barroso should not strive too hard to find an exciting new message. All three European institutions can honourably busy themselves with consolidation while pondering a success strategy that meets external competition and commands internal consensus. Europeans should throw off the sense of gilded decline that often goes with a set back in the season that the Americans the Fall. There is nothing pre-ordained in Europe's future. For the political classes of Europe this is just another season to follow Rudyard Kipling's injunction to:

“... watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn out tools.”

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