

“WHY WE SHOULD HAVE THE COURAGE TO SAY NO TO TURKEY”

13th September, 2004

We should be grateful to Commissioner Bolkestein for having the courage to launch the real debate about Turkish membership of the European Union. The arguments regularly trotted out by those who favour Turkish membership on grounds of geography, geopolitics, religion, demographics, human rights and historic guilt are sloppy and self-serving.

Turkey is not in Europe. The Treaty specifies that only European countries can be admitted. Perhaps it should have been re-drafted to say that admission was only open to countries that were wholly within Europe. In 220 BC Eratosthenes wrote ‘Europe’ to west of the Bosphorus and ‘Asia’ to its east. In the nineteenth century geographers and historians were equally clear. They divided the Ottoman Empire into Turkey in Europe and Asia Minor. All that remains of Turkey in Europe is the toe of land flanking Istanbul. To argue that this makes Turkey a European nation in geographical terms is flimsy. Is Spain an African nation because of its enclaves on the North African coast? If Gibraltar belonged to Morocco rather than Britain, would we have said yes to Morocco’s application to join the European Union? Timothy Garton Ash, while arguing the case for Turkish membership in his new book, *Free World*, does admit that he would “hate to plead the case in any historian’s court that Morocco is not a European country, but Turkey is”. One could of course argue that Turkey should not be the only geographically non-European member of the European Union and that Morocco and Armenia would make excellent candidates. But if Morocco, why not Algeria? If Armenia, why not Azerbaijan? The Treaty definition requiring candidates to be European would have been exposed to “mission creep” of the most flagrant kind.

There is no geopolitical reason for admitting Turkey. The truth is that geography is being abused by people with other agendas. It is not a valid argument that the EU should admit Turkey because the Americans want us to, or because Turkey is an important ally of the Israelis. The original American argument about the importance of Turkey in NATO collapsed along with the Soviet Union. In any case the European Union is not NATO, however close the two institutions may become. Both NATO and the Union have changed beyond all recognition since Turkey first sought Associate Membership of the Common Market. American analysts of the euro-phobic school make no secret of their desire for the European Union to be distracted from its global agenda by the problems of absorbing a new country, which would have the population of a Germany by the time it joined. Mrs Thatcher’s advocacy of Turkish membership was unashamedly designed to weaken the cohesion of the European Union.

It is nonsense to denounce those who oppose Turkish membership as wanting to keep Europe as a 'Christian club'. This is to vulgarise thirteen centuries of complex interaction between Europe and Islam. In any case there are already somewhere between twelve and thirteen million Muslims living in the Europe of 25. There are a further seven million Muslims in Balkan states. Indeed one should reasonably expect that there will be three predominately Muslim states in the completed European Union – Albania, Kosovo and the rump of Bosnia Herzegovina. It is wrong to say therefore that the European Union refuses to admit Turkey because the predominant religion of its population is Islam. The EU is already a multi-faith community. It has no need to prove its credentials by admitting Turkey.

The demographic case for Turkish membership is short-sighted and discriminatory. Some demographers argue the need to balance Europe's ageing population with a vast import of young Turkish labour. The American strategist Thomas Barnett argues that the USA will meet its own ageing problem in its traditional way by admitting millions of migrants from Mexico and Latin America.¹ He calculates that to achieve the same 'success', the European Union would need to admit 1.5 million immigrants a year and that by 2050 a quarter of its population would be foreign born. However the world is moving towards population balance or indeed reduction by 2050, so such vast upheavals would only 'solve' the ageing problem for one generation. In any case, one is surely entitled to wonder by what right Muslim immigration is privileged over non-Muslim? Similarly, one might wonder why Turkish Muslims are to be privileged over Egyptian or Indian Muslim immigrants?

Even in the area of human rights there is a great deal of sloppy and self-serving analysis around. The collective wisdom points to the real, if limited, improvements in Turkish human rights and the suspension of capital punishment, as gains from Europe's application of the Copenhagen Criteria. Some political parties fear the loss of support from existing Muslim communities in Europe. Yet even those with a genuine belief that Turkish entry should be welcomed as a way of improving the human rights situation seem to have lost their sense of moral proportion. Surely tolerance, freedom of expression and the abolition of capital punishment should be welcomed as shared values, or demanded of a "civilised" country, rather than reluctantly arm-twisted into existence by EU negotiators in exchange for a quota of oranges?

Underlying the whole question of Turkish membership is the broader mixture of amnesia and self-deception that characterises Europe's induced memories of its long interaction with Islam. Political correctness now requires Europeans to apologise for the Crusades, ignoring the fact that Byzantium had been resisting Islamic pressure for centuries. This Frankish-centric guilt forgets the Dhilli, the millions of Christians and Jews in the Eastern Mediterranean overrun in the early centuries of Muslim expansion.

I have no doubt that Turkish membership would be bad for the Union. The admission of Turkey to the Union would take up political energies that should more properly be used in completing the unification of Europe by admitting the states of South Eastern

¹ The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the 21st Century, by Thomas P M Barnett, ISBN 0-399-15175-3

Europe with their predominately Orthodox tradition. The Emperor Diocletian's split is still visible in the order in which we are admitting East and Central Europe to the Union: Catholic and Protestant states first. Barnett has an elegant model dividing the world into the Core, which has accepted globalisation, and a Gap which remains resistant to globalisation and covers much of the Arab world and Sub-Saharan Africa. He points out that the most interesting recent development is the enlargement of the Core by countries such as Russia, China and India. One can draw a similar model for the European Union where the original Core has been joined by the states of the recent enlargement, but where many of the non-member countries of South East Europe display the Gap-like characteristics of failed or failing states. Europe's most pressing mission should be to close this 'Balkan Gap' with its attendant violence and criminal activity.

Turkey's admission would also be bad for the Islamic world. Some non-Arab Muslim countries have a reasonable history of establishing and preserving democratic regimes. Yet Islam still desperately needs examples of successfully functioning democracies, and it would send entirely the wrong message if Turkey's recent relative success with democracy was 'rewarded' by its being defined as 'European'. There is something unforgivably patronising about the assumption that democracy can only come with being a part of Europe.

It would also be bad for the Arab world. The problem for the Arab world lies in the lack of legitimacy of the regimes that succeeded the destruction of the Ottoman Empire by the British and the French after the First World War. Europe can and should play a key role in bringing security and prosperity to the Greater Middle East. It will not however do so successfully on the basis of sloppy history which ignores the different traditions of Arab and Turk.

Above all it would not be good for Turkey itself. It would be much better to end a generation of diplomatic dishonesty by giving the Turks a simple 'No' now, rather than dragging them through yet more negotiations culminating in popular referenda, which might reject Turkey for all the wrong reasons of Islamophobia, prejudice and fear. Much better that Europe and Turkey should jointly, but separately, co-operate economically and politically in bringing stability to the blood stained regions where Europe and Asia abut.

Tom Spencer

Former President of the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee

Executive Director European Centre for Public Affairs and
Visiting Professor of Public Affairs, Brunel University.



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