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"From European Community to European Union:
Why is it so difficult?"

by Roy Pryce

FROM EUROPEAN COMMUNITY TO EUROPEAN UNION:
WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT,

Roy Pryce
Director, Federal Trust for Education and Research,
London

1. It is now almost thirteen years since the leaders of the European Community agreed to transform the whole complex of their relations into a European Union. The original intention was to achieve this before the end of the 'seventies. But in spite of repeated reaffirmations of good intentions, it is only recently that a firm proposal has been put to the European Council to open negotiations for a Treaty of European Union. The prospects for such a Treaty are very uncertain. What has gone wrong? Why has it proved so difficult to transform the European Community into a European Union?

2. The question is worth posing not only for academic but also for practical reasons. If we can identify the main obstacles, this may be helpful to policy makers to find ways of overcoming them. Have the difficulties arisen because of disagreements about the nature of the Union to be aimed at? Or because of defects in the strategies which have been used to reach it? Or because of more general difficulties affecting relations between the members of the Community? The aim of this paper is to explore the answers to these questions. (1)

I. EVOLUTION OF THE COMMUNITY

3. The process of integration set in motion by the Six has proved to be far more complex, and more uncertain in its pace and direction, than some early theorists anticipated. In particular, the obstacles have proved more numerous and severe than expected.

4. Support for the process has been maintained at a high level in the original member states, and has been sustained by new arguments and new interests.

Influential political and economic elites continue actively to press for closer and more effective unity. However:

- in all of the newer member states, support is markedly lower than elsewhere in the Community;
- the support given by the general public is "sufficiently strong to have survived years of economic recession but not strong enough to motivate citizens and political parties to press for further progress towards European unification" (Eurobarometer, No 22, December 1984, p. 35);
- trans-national support structures, and in particular those of the political parties, are still under-developed and weak.

5. While the member states provide the most important channel of support, they are at the same time the source of the most persistent obstacles in the way of a closer and more effective Community. These derive from:

- resistance in individual states at both political and administrative levels, to loss of policy-making autonomy;
- disagreements between member states, based on divergent interests, both on individual policy issues and on the future development of the Community.

6. Additional obstacles have been created, paradoxically, by the success of the Community. The most important derive from the successive enlargements of the Community. The negotiation of these has proved divisive and time-consuming. Enlargement has introduced members far less committed to (and in some cases, actively hostile to) further measures of integration; it has meant a wider spread of interests to reconcile, and has also disturbed previous patterns of interests in a way that has created new policy problems (for instance, the budget, agricultural and fisheries policy, etc.). Enlargement has also reinforced the trend towards intergovernmental modes of working together and consolidated the abuses of the treaty rules relating to the use of majority voting at which the Five themselves connived in the Luxembourg 'compromise'. The engine of the Community has weakened by recourse to consensus politics, while the braking power in the hands of the member states has been much increased by the use of the veto. The increase in the numbers and size has not been matched by an increase in strength.

7. A further obstacle to closer union is western Europe's continued strategic dependence on the United States. In economic relations, common European interests have provided an incentive for common action. But in foreign and defence policy, worries about disturbing the Atlantic Alliance and the US commitment to European defence - as well as disagreements between the members on policy and attitudes towards the US - continue to act as a powerful brake on the development of a common European defence and foreign policy.

8. In the face of these multiple difficulties, it has proved difficult to maintain the forward momentum of the Community. Each step, even for the conduct of day-to-day business, has required the careful construction of bargains acceptable to each of the partners. This has proved difficult enough even in areas where common action is already well-established. The recent performance of the Community is evidence enough of this. So it is not surprising that it

has proved even more difficult to find the basis for agreement to initiate common action in areas lying outside current commitments, and to change current methods of working together.

II. IN SEARCH OF 'AN EVER CLOSER UNION': THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SIX.

9. In the search for a closer union, a variety of strategies has been employed. It is worth first examining the experience of the Six in this respect.

10. In the early 'fifties the success of the Schuman Plan and the ESCS led to hopes of a successful early assault on the heartland of national sovereignty. Both the EDC Treaty and the Draft Treaty for a Political Community drawn up by the Ad Hoc Assembly in 1952-54 were designed with this in mind. When this failed time horizons had to be lengthened, and the basic strategy became one of incremental economic integration. Federalists have continued to argue that this strategy is defective because it does not provide effective authority for common action. Current proposals for European Union acknowledge the need to tackle this problem of the construction of a 'genuine political entity', as the Dooge Report puts it.

11. Within the incremental approach adopted by the Six two different strategies were employed: big jumps and small steps. There were two of the former: many more of the latter.

12. The first big jump brought the Six together when they set up the ECSC: the second took them into a major expansion of their programme of economic integration through the Rome treaties. There were big differences between the two developments in the way they were initiated and subsequently negotiated, in the substance of the policy agreements they incorporated, and the decision-making machinery through which these were to be carried out. But three factors were crucial to their success:

- the careful specification of a project incorporating an acceptable bargain between the various national interests;

- strong, high-level leadership, based on agreement between France and the Federal Republic;

- fortunate timing.

13. For the rest, the Six advanced through a series of small steps and bargains on specific issues. In the period between 1958 and 1969 the framework and priorities for action were set by the EEC Treaty. Negotiations between the member states were concerned with the gradual implementation of the customs union, the construction of the common agricultural policy, competition policy and so on. It was only after the successful completion of the transitional period that serious attention had to be given to what to do next.

14. Two parallel lines of advance were then attempted. These aimed at Economic and Monetary Union on the one hand, and Political Union on the other. Both objectives were ambitious. But it is noteworthy that in both cases a cautious approach was adopted, and action based on ministerial agreements rather than new treaties. The agreement reached in March 1971, following the Werner Report

on EMU, was confined to the first of the three proposed stages, and without any automatic commitment to go further. And rather than embark on a Treaty of Political Union (as de Gaulle had sought in 1960-62) the Six decided in 1970 on the basis of the Davignon Report to initiative cooperation in the field of foreign policy in a low-key and pragmatic manner.

15. The same approach also dominated the Summit of October 1972 when the leaders of the enlarged Community set out their objectives for the future. They reaffirmed the general direction which the Six had already adopted, and added some additional policy areas to the Community's agenda. And while they also adopted a commitment to European Union, it was left completely open how this was to be achieved, by a series of more small steps or by a big jump.

III. THE ENLARGED COMMUNITY AND EUROPEAN UNION

16. In adopting their new goal, the leaders of the Community did not specify either what it was to consist of. So no one knew what it meant. Initially, this was thought to be an advantage: the expression 'European Union' was chosen deliberately because of its neutral meaning. Sceptics concluded that it was empty rhetoric. And it has taken a long time to give it substance.

17. The phrase, nevertheless, has a different resonance in different countries. In Britain, for instance, the concept arouses none of the favourable responses that are so evident in Italy. The reasons lie deeply embedded in our respective histories and political cultures. The British, though they are fast becoming Europeans, are still suspicious and fearful. The last time they entered into a Union, with the Scots, was a long time ago. Union to them means centralisation of power, an irrevocable transfer of authority, and the threat of more rules made by foreigners. They do not like the sound of it at all.

18. So there are problems with the concept. For the newer members of the Community there is also reluctance to take on new obligations at a time when they are still struggling to become accustomed to the obligations of membership of the existing Communities. And all this is separate from the difficulties which specific aspects of the proposed-Union pose for them.

19. These have only gradually emerged. For a second problem, of a more general nature, with the quest for European Union has been the very slow progress made in defining its parameters. A major reason for this is that the agenda of the enlarged Community has been crowded with other, and more pressing, issues. In addition to those arising from successive enlargements, including the need to devote far more attention to issues of external relations, major economic and social problems have also clamoured for attention. There has been little energy left to devote to new developments. Most of the available energy has been channelled into measures related to the strengthening of the economic performance of the Community, most notably through the establishment of the European Monetary System. This was only achieved through the active, personal, and direct involvement of the leaders of France and the Federal Republic. But if in this instance the Paris-Bonn relationship succeeded once again in enlarging the bounds of common action, it has otherwise operated only fitfully to maintain the momentum of the Community.

20. In the face of these difficulties, it proved impossible for several years to make any significant progress towards European Union. Mr Tindemans, in his 1975 report, was forced to adopt a cautious approach. He limited himself to sketching out some of its component parts and indicating lines of advance. Four years later, the Report of the Three Wise Men poured cold water on the idea. ("An excess of ambition, particularly when it begins and ends with mere words, breeds confusion, frustration, and indifference"). The Report interpreted European Union as "not so much a definite goal as a direction of movement". It was only subsequently, with the Solemn Declaration on European Union agreed by the European Council at Stuttgart in June 1983 as the outcome of the Genscher-Colombo initiative, and more concretely in the European Parliament's Draft Treaty for European Union (February 1984) and the report of the Ad Hoc (Dooge) Committee on Institutional Reform (December 1984) that European Union began to be defined in more detail. So it is only recently that the project has begun to fulfil the first of the conditions that the experience of the Six showed to be a necessary pre-condition for a successful leap forward.

21. There is now a substantial measure of agreement about the range of issues to be covered in an agreement on European Union, and some convergence of national positions on matters of substance. At the same time there are, however, important reservations on the part of several member states both about the substance of European Union and the best way to proceed towards it. This must cast doubt on the possibilities of agreement on the full range of recommendations made by the majority of the Dooge Committee.

22. There must also be doubts about the availability of sufficiently strong leadership, and in particular Franco-German leadership. The lack of this was a major reason for the very limited progress made at the time of the Tindemans Report and also the subsequent Genscher-Colombo initiative. More recently, the lead taken by Altiero Spinelli in the European Parliament, and his success in persuading a large majority of its members to support the Draft Treaty, has introduced a new and forceful element into the situation. In addition to helping to mobilise the support of major political parties for the project, this also encouraged President Mitterrand to take his own initiative in the European Council. As a result of this, the issue is now back on the agenda of the Community at the highest level. But how it will be treated depends to a great extent on whether the Federal Republic will put its full weight behind the Dooge Committee's proposals.

23. The doubts about this have been reinforced by recent developments in the relations between Paris and Bonn on other issues. What appeared to be a window of opportunity offered by the availability of strong French leadership now appears to be seriously compromised. The element of fortunate timing, so important on earlier occasions, may be lacking on this occasion.

24. Currently, prospects of agreement on the full agenda proposed by the Dooge report therefore do not appear to be very promising. The Ten - and subsequently the Twelve - may nevertheless succeed, as the Six did on more than one occasion, in disproving the sceptics. But a more probable outcome is a less ambitious agreement which could take a variety of forms.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

25. The conclusions to be drawn from this brief survey suggest that the difficulties encountered in moving towards European Union have multiple causes. The most important lie in the way the Community itself has evolved through successive phases of its enlargement. Others are due to the concept of European Union itself, and the uncertainties of what it should consist of. Until recently, the initiatives taken in an attempt to make progress towards it have had to be mainly devoted to resolving these questions of substance.

26. Though many difficulties persist, there are nevertheless in the current situation a number of encouraging elements. The expansive phase of the Community is now coming to an end with the agreement on the entry of Spain and Portugal and this could release more energies to construct a closer union; and its performance is a powerful motivation in the same direction; the nature of European Union has now been specified; significant political forces have now been mobilised behind its achievement; and the issue is now firmly on the agenda of the European Council. The point has now been reached when European Union can no longer be dismissed as mere rhetoric. And the credibility of the leaders of the Community is now at stake in the eyes both of the citizens of the Community and of the outside world.

(1) A study of these questions is currently being carried out by the Trans-European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) with support from the European Cultural Foundation. The present paper draws on work done for this project, but the views expressed are the sole responsibility of the author.

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