

'Gothenburg or the Promised Land?' from L'Europe en formation (Summer 2001)

Caption: In its summer 2001 issue, the Federalist journal L'Europe en Formation criticises the unsatisfactory outcome of the Gothenburg European Council held on 15 and 16 June 2001.

Source: L'Europe en formation. Eté 2001, n° 321. Nice. "Göteborg ou la terre promise?", p. 3-6.

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Gothenburg or the Promised Land?

Editorial

The style of diplomatic communications and declarations is inimitable. The ‘Presidency conclusions’ issued at the Gothenburg European Council held on 15 and 16 June 2001, which had been heralded as a ‘highlight’ of Sweden’s Presidency of the European Union, were no exception, even if media attention focused mainly on the violent protests by anti-globalisation groups which disturbed the calm atmosphere of the deliberations by the Heads of State or Government, who had met for the occasion in the quiet Baltic city.

- Everything is going well ... Despite the Irish rejection of the Treaty of Nice, the Fifteen proclaimed the ‘irreversibility’ of the current enlargement process. Accession negotiations will be concluded by the end of 2002 with the candidate countries that ‘meet the accession criteria’ and comply with the ‘road map’ that they have been given. This will allow the new Member States to participate in the European Parliament elections in spring 2004.
- Everything is going well, even though ‘the economic environment has deteriorated significantly’ and ‘growth prospects in the Union have weakened’. Provided the Fifteen continue to implement an appropriate macroeconomic policy ‘with determination’, ‘move their budgetary positions towards balance or towards surplus’, resist inflationary pressures ‘through supply-side action to remove bottlenecks in markets’ and ‘manage demand by fiscal policy where necessary’, the ‘conditions conducive to growth and continued job creation’ will be met. So that there can be no doubt, Chapter III of the Gothenburg conclusions is also entitled ‘Full employment and quality of work in a competitive Union’.
- Everything is also going well as far as ‘cooperating for peace and security’ is concerned, provided the Union ‘refines its capabilities’ and ‘structures and procedures in order to improve its ability to undertake the full range of conflict prevention and crisis management tasks’. Moreover (should there be any doubt), even though agreement has not yet been reached on EU access to NATO assets and capabilities, ‘progress has been made in the development of a permanent and effective relationship with NATO’. The Belgian Presidency is strongly invited to take forward work on all aspects of the ESDP (European Security and Defence Policy) with a view to ‘achieving the objective of making the EU quickly operational’, which means no later than at the European Council in Laeken in December. Furthermore, ‘substantial progress has been made’, it seems, in building ‘an effective partnership with the UN’ and in ‘mutually reinforcing approaches’.
- Undoubtedly, everything is not going quite as well in US-Europe relations, on account of the disagreements over the Kyoto Protocol and its ratification. Nevertheless, the Gothenburg European Council welcomed the commitment by George W. Bush not to block the Kyoto process. And, as the greatest possible consolation, the EU and US leaders nevertheless agreed to ‘establish a High-Level Group of personal representatives on climate change’. Some consolation!

Furthermore, in an entirely different vein, ‘the successful conclusion of the long-standing dispute between the EU and the US regarding bananas’ is regarded as ‘a welcome development and the hope is that similarly satisfactory solutions will be found soon for other outstanding disputes including those in the steel sector.’

Even in relations with Russia, ‘important steps have been taken towards forging a partnership’ with the European Union, despite the war in Chechnya, Putin’s dealings with the media, etc. What then is there to complain about? The rest of the Gothenburg ‘conclusions’ follow in the same vein, even though this rose-tinted prose does not fool anyone.

- But the real ‘Promised Land’ in Gothenburg for the peoples of Europe lies elsewhere. It is ‘sustainable development’, which means that ‘economic, social and environmental policies [are now dealt with] in a mutually reinforcing way’ in order to address ‘trends that threaten future quality of life’. Failure to reverse these trends ‘will steeply increase the costs to society or make those trends irreversible.’

The sustainable development strategy will therefore be based on the principle that ‘the economic, social and

environmental effects of all policies should be examined in a coordinated way and taken into account in decision-making.’ As broad a consultation as possible of stakeholders will be organised (or so it is promised). The European Council will, at each of its annual spring meetings, give ‘policy guidance’ as necessary. The Commission will ‘include in its action plan mechanisms to ensure that all major policy proposals include a sustainability impact assessment covering their potential economic, social and environmental consequences.’

In addition, the Union’s strategy will have a global dimension. In this respect, the preparations for the Johannesburg World Summit on Development in 2002 should be an ideal opportunity for it to become universally established. The European Council also suggested four priority areas: climate change (despite the fairly discouraging precedent of Kyoto), transport, public health and natural resources. The environmental concern will finally be ‘integrated into all Community policies’ from now on, in particular the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, not forgetting any aspect that can help to halt the biodiversity decline.

This realisation on the part of the European Communities can only be welcomed, however belated it may be. The Club of Rome long ago made a start along similar lines, but nothing really came of it. The European Union’s new societal strategy will be meaningful, however, only if it is accompanied by practical measures and targets with specific figures and timetables, imposing commitments on public authorities, as the European Parliament has pointed out. The fine words and the laudable intentions, if they are not put into practice, will give rise to disappointment or even have a negative effect on public opinion. Either the ‘sustainable development policy’ will remain a bombastic token gesture or it will emerge as a new general discipline and conflict with established interests on specific points. For that reason, if it is to become established, it will require the active support of civil society, community bodies and local authorities. Gothenburg or the Promised Land?

L’Europe en formation