

## 'The shadows of Europe's past catch up with its future' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (9 December 2000)

**Caption:** On 9 December 2000, commenting on the Nice European Council (7, 8 and 9 December), the German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung analyses the political and institutional implications of the meeting attended by the Heads of State or Government of the Fifteen.

**Source:** Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. 09.12.2000, Nr. 287. Frankfurt/Main. "Die Schatten der Vergangenheit holen Europas Zukunft ein", auteur:Hort, Peter , p. 7.

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## The shadows of Europe's past catch up with its future

At the Nice Summit both the French and the Germans are suffering from the Unspoken / By Peter Hort

NICE, 8 December. The question most often asked at this rather unusual conference goes: when will the conference end? This Saturday, on Sunday or not until Monday? How long will the piteous Heads of State or Government have to stay holed up in their bunker at the Acropolis Centre? Bets are being taken, with stakes of up to a hundred francs. The hot tip seems to be Sunday, between two and three in the morning. But two of the older, more experienced Summit diplomats are adamant: if by Saturday midday there is still no prospect of a compromise on the most important issues raised by the proposed reform, there will be no point in going on with the negotiations. The cost of breaking off the talks would then be lower than that of a bad compromise, one which would be interpreted as an acknowledgment of failure.

The uncertainty which has been the hallmark of this conference has some readily understandable causes, and some which are less so. The understandable causes include the dual weights bearing down on the host's shoulders. On the one hand, Jacques Chirac seems increasingly to have been caught up by the funding scandal affecting his party. On the other hand, the President of the EU Council, caught up in the cohabitation with the Socialist Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, appears almost paralysed. The election campaign having already begun, they are each marking their rival's every word and step. This may help explain why for a number of weeks now the French EU Presidency has looked very little like an honest European broker and has tended rather to shelter behind national walls. Compromise, the lubricant which has always oiled the wheels of European politics, had pretty well run out long before the meeting.

Rather more difficult to understand is the fact that the other participants too have gone into a state of suspended animation. The Community is dozing off, at the same time as it is demanding intense activity from the accession candidates. The need for it to set its own house in order if it is to take in twelve (and later more) new members has been on the agenda for many years. Three-and-a-half years ago an initial reform attempt was made in Amsterdam but failed for want of the necessary political will: the Heads of State or Government were willing to concede neither a significant curtailment of their power of veto in the Council of Ministers, nor a reweighting of the voting rights of small and large EU countries, nor again a limitation on the number of Commissioners in Brussels. Virtually nothing has changed on these points. A second governmental conference went round in circles for some 320 hours, getting no further than an exchange of the now-familiar positions on the 'left-overs' from Amsterdam. In diplomatic language, there was a lot of constructive debate but very little negotiation.

When will they finally get down to brass tacks? And who will dare to take the first step, allowing the others to come out of their national bastions too? Following a rather disjointed, non-committal start on the first day, following the meeting with the accession candidates and the solemn proclamation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, they are now — how many times is that? — appealing to each other's conscience. Over dinner it was once again ascertained that the Poles, the Hungarians, the Czechs and all the other nations wishing to return to the European fold were expecting too much of the Nice Summit. But the various national concerns — policy on the protection of vested rights, the dispute between the large and small Member States which again created so much confusion at the special summit in Biarritz — would have to be set aside in the name of the unification of all Europeans. Chirac too said everyone must be prepared to move.

But behind these words of mutual encouragement lurks the Unspoken. One look at the owlish face of Germany's Foreign Minister and you already have an inkling of the hidden thoughts which have so soured relations between the French and German Governments in recent weeks and caused much spluttering in the European engine. When Chirac and his Foreign Minister, Hubert Védrine, delved deep into the history of Franco-German reconciliation and came up with the principle of equal rights for France and Germany in the Community organs, the dark shadows of the past were suddenly there again. Could it be that fifty years of holding hands, even over the graves of Verdun, has failed to dispel the deep suspicion of old? Schröder's concern that account be taken of the fact that Germany's population exceeds that of France by 23 million was unceremoniously dismissed by Chirac.

And when Védrine, questioned about Europe's visionaries, warned against the 'pied pipers' who had already left Europe with so many disappointments, Fischer's face could be seen to darken.

Schröder got his people to search the Chancellery archives for records of Adenauer's discussions with Monnet and others in the 1950s — with no result. Not because those records have disappeared as well but because his officials did not come across any agreements between Germany and France concerning equality of rights. But what does that matter after all? The question of a reweighting of voting rights in favour of Germany did not arise prior to reunification and while Chirac may have discussed superior voting rights for Germany with Schröder's predecessor Kohl, this was in connection with the European Parliament, not the Council of Ministers. The redistribution of voting rights is, according to Schröder and Fischer, a general issue, rather than a purely Franco-German one. With the imminent enlargement of the EU from 15 to 27 Member States, Germany will have as many inhabitants as the 17 most lightly populated countries combined. Their overrepresentation would leave those countries with 57 votes, while Germany would have only 10. The relationship between the small and large Member States would thus be thrown out of joint.

That this is more than just a Franco-German problem was made abundantly clear by the Dutch and the Spanish. The Netherlands has a population of 16 million, compared with the 10 million people who live in Belgium. And yet both countries have five votes in the Council of Ministers. For their part, the Spanish are insisting on an adjustment of voting rights if they are to lose one of their two Commissioners in Brussels.

The poker game about power-sharing in a growing Europe got underway in earnest on Friday afternoon. If Chirac were to offer increased voting rights to the above countries alone, while insisting that the Germans remain at parity with France, this would be unacceptable to Schröder. It was, however, felt by many observers that in view of the special nature of the French-German relationship, Schröder might in the end be able to settle for a symbolic voting advantage over France. But these considerations too still formed part, as of Friday, of the Unspoken.