

'Our Europe' from Die Zeit (29 June 2000)

Caption: On 29 June 2000, the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit compares the French President Jacques Chirac's speech on the prospects for the European Union with the speech given by the German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, in Berlin on 12 May 2000.

Source: Die Zeit. 29.06.2000. Hamburg. "Unser Europa", auteur:Hénard, Jacqueline , p. 2.

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Our Europe

When Jacques Chirac speaks, a measure of awkwardness is always on the cards. At times he appears excruciatingly tense, at others he fails to get to the point. In Berlin, however, the French President was manifestly at ease. Immediately prior to the start of the French Council Presidency, he delivered a clear and explicit speech on the prospects for Europe — this was his contribution to the debate which Joschka Fischer, speaking in a personal capacity, had launched six weeks previously. A speech specific enough to commit the speaker, sufficiently open not to antagonise. This was about as far as Chirac could go.

It was not in Paris but in Berlin, in an address to the Bundestag, that the French President declared the aim of creating an ‘avant-garde’ inside the Union by next year. A ‘Secretariat’ of a new kind would ensure that the members of this group coordinate their action closely in the areas of economic policy, defence policy and the fight against crime. At the same time, Chirac wishes to bring order to the tangle of European Treaties from Rome to Amsterdam and on to Nice and initiate a wide-ranging debate on the democratisation of Europe. That debate would clear the way for a European Constitution which, a few years hence, would lay down common values and determine the respective powers at the various European levels.

In so doing, Chirac has established aims and deadlines which, hitherto in Paris, had been no more than imaginings dreamed up by individuals and informal working groups. The speech itself betrays the influence of former Commission President Jacques Delors, who first put forward the notion of an avant-garde some months ago. It likewise betrays the influence of Chirac faithfuls Alain Juppé and Jacques Toubon, who have already completed their draft of a European Constitution. Finally, with his call for more democracy and greater citizen involvement, Chirac turns the arguments of the Euro-sceptics in his own country into pressure in favour of the Union.

And yet: Chirac’s ‘Our Europe’ address falls short of Fischer’s ambitious ‘Federation of nation-states’ speech. Nowhere does he even mention the word ‘federation’. On the other hand, he does introduce a new concept, that of ‘common sovereignty’, for example in the European Central Bank or the Luxembourg-based European Court of Justice, both of which were explicitly referred to by Fischer as ‘federal elements’. That could be seen as a gentle reprimand for the German Foreign Minister or, looked at positively, as a helpful contribution to the development of a new doctrine on sovereignty.

Meanwhile, Chirac leaves many of Fischer’s proposals unanswered: the idea of an elected European President is one example. He evades other important questions, despite their having been posed publicly by Fischer’s French counterpart, Védrine. Who — other than Germany and France — belongs in the avant-garde? Must not the United Kingdom be on board, if only because it is indispensable as a partner in European security policy?

While Chirac was speaking, some half-dozen Britons from the Downing Street Policy Unit were sitting on the Bundestag rostrum. And on Thursday evening Tony Blair will be coming to dinner with the Chancellor in Berlin. That will be the acid test.

JACQUELINE HÉNARD