

Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, Four months for Europe

Caption: In November 2003, Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, an Italian and member of the Executive Board of the European Central Bank (ECB), criticises the shortcomings of the draft European Constitution drawn up by the European Convention and presented on 18 July 2003 in Rome to Silvio Berlusconi, President-in-Office of the Council of the European Union, at the opening of the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC).

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Four months for Europe

Tommaso Padoa Schioppa

Politics is always the art of the possible; but it is good politics only if, amidst the many, it pursues the *best possible*, when it achieves it, it is great politics. I do not consider good politics the work of the European Convention, handed out some days ago to the Italian government. Indeed, I am convinced that the decisive step towards a real European Union was possible and the Convention missed it just when Europe and the world have an almost desperate need of union and strength.

Union, it must be repeated, means ability to decide and act for the common good. And as Europe's common good — internal and external peace in the first place — has been laid down for some time, the two objectives were, and are, to extend the majority decision making and to provide the resources and the means; all the rest is fringe. The Convention missed both of them. It did some important things, but on the fringe; the decisive step towards the real union, there is no point in disguising it, was missed.

The step was possible. For the first time they set about to write a Constitution, the founding act of a political Union, given that in the contemporary world the States are not born out of marriage or conquest. For the first time, the task was entrusted not to government officials, but to a representative assembly, and in it a clear majority was in favor of the union. Certainly, the Convention was bound to split, and also the governments of the present Union would split. But when did they not split in the past, at each one of the steps that were accomplished? Hence, it was not good politics, and who knows if another occasion will ever occur again. Sometimes I fear that a future historian will remember the year 2003 as that in which Europe — like Italy in the XV Century or ancient Greece — lost its last chance to remain an active player in world history.

This, anyway, is the past. Today, the best of the possibles is no longer the same of one year ago, nor maybe of three months ago. And for Europe, for Italy which is presiding over it, good politics is to assess the best of what is possible today, and pursue it with determination. I believe that such "best" is, in spite of what I said above, to approve the Convention's project and make it stronger — maybe — in one point. The point is the possibility to proceed, under the new treaty, beyond the result achieved so far (the so called evolutionary clauses).

Certainly it will not be the big step. However, it will not be an easy step either, because today the risk of making the result worse is bigger than the possibility of making it better. It will be necessary to thwart the attempts, already announced, to strip the project of its present attributes; and it will be necessary to explore any possibility of making it stronger.

The European presidency is a potentially powerful tool. However, we have seen in the past feeble presidencies, paralyzed by disorganization and by the reproachable desire of pleasing everybody. In the past, Italy was able to use the presidency with a very great skill, determination, smartness, a precise strategic sense, because it had objectives clear in their substance, not the desire of pleasing everybody. More than once Italy, that of the wrongly despised First Republic, played great politics in Europe. Are four months enough time for achieving the best of what is possible today, and getting the satisfaction of a solemn signing ceremony in Rome? I believe so. Normally, the length of time does not help the outcome of difficult negotiations. The Bretton Woods conference, which in 1944 laid the bases of a new international monetary system, lasted less than twenty days; the Philadelphia Convention, which in 1787 wrote the American Constitution, six weeks. Four months are enough if the objective is not the signing in Rome, but the quality of the achievement.