

'A somewhat optimistic Wolfgang Schüssel receives criticism and encouragement from MEPs' from the Europe Daily Bulletin (18 January 2006)

Caption: On 18 January 2006, the Europe Daily Bulletin, published in Brussels by Agence Europe, comments on the presentation of the programme of the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union to the European Parliament by the Austrian Chancellor, Wolfgang Schüssel.

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A somewhat optimistic Wolfgang Schüssel receives criticism and encouragement from MEPs - Restoring citizen confidence, tackling unemployment, growth and energy (Strasbourg, 18 janvier 2006)

(Agence Europe) - The debate on the programme during the six-month term of office of the Austrian EU Council Presidency, on 18 January at the European Parliament, was sometimes marked, as is the case at the beginning of each term of presidency, sometimes by encouragement, and sometimes by virulent criticism, often with unflattering allusions to the previous Presidency ("*All you have to do is follow a recipe - don't do what Tony Blair did*", MEP Wolfgang Schüssel said).

No institution represents the wealth and diversity of the "*populus europeus*" and the strength of the "*new Europe*" as much as the European Parliament does, Chancellor Schüssel said, presenting his presidency programme. Despite this strength, however, citizens remain sceptical and, Mr Schüssel believes, one of the main tasks during Austria's term of Presidency is to restore citizen confidence and also to restore confidence between institutions and between States (see also EUROPE 9105). The chancellor said his watchword is to "*work hand in hand*" and also to hold discussion and raise questions as, as one Austrian physician said, "*it all lies in the question*". In addition to the questions already posed by citizens to be discussed during the Spring Summit, the current state of affairs brings another question to the fore: - that of energy supply security. This theme will have to be tackled together without seeking short-term solutions, Mr Schüssel stressed, applauded on several occasions by MEPs. He was adamant about the need for new energy sources. He explained that his country had made a choice that rules out the nuclear option, and that he would stick to it, but that each country should have the right to make its own decision in this respect. The second key theme of the Spring Summit will be growth and employment and, if the Union cannot create jobs itself, then it may and must create conditions favourable for job creation, mainly by encouraging SME employment. Mr Schüssel felt that SMEs are the "*only real machine for job creation*" in the Union. There can be no constructive discussion on such themes without the active involvement of social partners, mainly when it comes to the directive on services, with the difficult task of seeking the balance that must be struck between liberalisation and protection. In the debate on growth, Mr Schüssel said, moreover, that one should not ignore the growth potential of enlargement carried out in an "*intelligent and correct manner*". The red line underpinning all these discussions is the agreement to be reached on financial perspectives. Recalling the budgetary constraints of each country, Mr Schüssel stressed the need to strengthen the Union's own financing. He went on to add that, although it might not be a very popular subject, he feels he should point to the fact that it is "*absurd for short-term financial speculation to escape the tax authorities*" (an issue that a strong Europe should not be afraid of raising), and that it is also absurd for Mr Solana and Ms Ferrero-Waldner to have to "so about hat in hand begging for money for peace-keeping missions", Mr Schüssel also urged for tighter controls on the use of Community money and for greater transparency when it comes to decision-making.

The other key theme to be tackled by the Austrian EU Presidency is the Constitution, and the debate should be neither exclusive nor rhetorical, as it is a question of European identity which holds Europeans together, of fair division of labour, and of subsidiary which should become a living reality, Wolfgang Schüssel said. On the subject of subsidiary, he felt that only those who have something to give have their hands free. He also called for a Europe that is visible within its borders but also around its periphery. Concluding on a resolute note of optimism, he said the values of "our European way of life" must be "*proudly*" and resolutely upheld, adding that he looks forward to tackling the common task.

Jose Manuel Barroso, Commission President, also shares Schüssel's optimism. All the conditions are there, he said, recalling the revised Lisbon strategy and the determination to carry out structural reforms, to be reaffirmed during the Spring Summit. Mr Barroso welcomes the Austrian Presidency's resolve to pursue work on the services directive, a directive that should take into account the specific nature of services of general interest. Lessons learnt by the interruption in gas supplies, sustainable growth, external action, relations with EU neighbours; - these are the other key themes on the agenda for the next six months. As far as external relations are concerned, Mr Barroso announced that he will be visiting the Balkans in coming months and called on the Union to take on more responsibility concerning Kosovo. The Commission president concluded Europe should come out of gloom as, as Mr Schüssel once said, Europe is not

monochrome but rich in colour.

Citizens' confidence, openness and protection in the context of the services directive, support for SMEs, progress on the Constitution - on such matters the president of the EPP-ED Group, Hans-Gert Pöttering, fully agrees with the main objectives of the Austrian EU Presidency.

He added that even if the EU is not the only answer to challenges, there cannot be an answer without the EU, and EU which should not be a Europe of the national interests of big Member States but of all its members. Martin Schulz, President of the Socialist group, said that listening to Schüssel, he got the impression that holding the Presidency of the EU is fun, but all that glitters is not gold, he said. On the Financial Perspectives and the British rebate, Schulz sarcastically commented that listening to Tony Blair, one gets the impression he should be given the Nobel Prize for inventing Pythagoras' Theorem when he says that slowing down an increase is actually a reduction. Addressing both the Council and Commission, Schulz quoted Osmin (in other words, the European Parliament) singing in 'L'enlèvement du sérail' that he was not stupid and understood the tricks and stratagems. Schulz said he agreed with the Austrian Presidency's desire to be optimistic and get out of the black and grey picture. Schulz said more red was needed.

Graham Watson, President of the ALDE group, was both critical and encouraging. He started by ridiculing the European Council for its EU budget deal. He said Erasmus was a great success so they cut funding for young people, Airbus is a triumphant common initiative so they cut R&D spending to make sure it isn't duplicated. The British Liberal Democrat urged Chancellor Schüssel to not feel threatened by European Court of Justice rulings (see EUROPE 9109), to not extend transition arrangements preventing the free movement of workers from the new EU Member States, to ensure the Vienna Monitoring Centre on racism and xenophobia is turned into a genuine European Agency of Fundamental Rights (he said it was an Austrian, Simon Wiesenthal, who had said that freedom is not a gift from heaven and you have to fight for it every day). More critical, Co-President of the Greens/EFA group, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, asked Chancellor Schüssel to finally say what he wanted rather than what other people wanted. He said that according to Cohn-Bendit's friend Albert Einstein, the important thing about true question is what one actually does. The German Green told the Austrian criticised the President of the European Council's silence about the country of origin idea in the services directive, about failings in the German and Austrian education systems (failing to guarantee equality) (he added that this was not his finding, but the view of the neoliberal OECD). On the European way of life, Cohn-Bendit asked whether Schüssel was prepared to fight to prevent behaviour falling fall of this way of life in Europe, like the behaviour of the CIA. Francis Wurtz, President of the GUE/NGL group, said Wolfgang Schüssel had at least started the Austrian Presidency with more modesty than Tony Blair. He told Schüssel he had inherited a mine-field with the draft directive on port services and the Financial Perspectives. The French Communist said people were expecting tangible action from him and urged the Austrian Presidency to formally withdraw the draft directive on liberalising port services. Wurtz added that there had been leaked reports from Hampton Court that Schüssel had said that if it wasn't possible to save the port services directive, it should be withdrawn. Co-President of the UEN, Cristiana Muscardini, spoke about relaunching economic policy and the European foreign policy, welcoming the Austrian Presidency's desire to reopen the path to the constitutional treaty. She said the constitutional draft text should be slimmed down and made feasible. Roger Knapman, a British member of the Independence and Democracy group, took a different tack, criticising Wolfgang Schüssel's disdain for democracy with his desire to save the European constitution. Knapman made the statement often heard from the lips of UK Independence Party members, namely that the EU had become a very, very expensive club.

British Liberal Andrew Duff tersely commented that Sarkozy wants a concentrated constitution, Merkel wants a social protocol, Juncker and Verhofstadt want the constitution renegotiated, Bot says the constitution is dead and Blair is keeping a profound silence on the whole thing - which one of them can be right?, asked Duff. French Socialist (from Brittany) Bernard Poignant said he would have been Austrian if the marriage of Maximilian of Austria with the daughter of the Duke of Brittany had lasted. He warned Schüssel to beware of the European Parliament, saying it was in the process of being constructed and therefore was rebelling and had to be given some money. Poignant said he would like to see the money he thought the European Parliament should be given going to the budget heading on citizenship, youth and culture. Polish ALDE MEP Bronislaw Geremek said democracy, human rights and peace were at the centre

of Polish concerns about relations with Iran, Russia and China and unity was needed in this field. Fellow Pole Jacek Saryusz Wolski (EPP-ED) slammed the Austrian Presidency for joining the misers' club and slammed Austria for wanting to extend its restrictions on the freedom of movement of workers from new Member States. Austrian EPP-ED MEP Ursula Stenzel, who is leaving the European Parliament to take up office as mayor of borough of Vienna, struck a different note, telling Schüssel she was sure that despite the scale of the task he would manage to make progress on the Financial Perspectives.

Several Austrian MEPs took part in the debate. Othmar Karas of the OVP encouraged the Presidency in its efforts on greater transparency, and non-attached member Hans-Peter Marin followed suit, although in more forthright manner. (Karin Resetarits, also from his list, spoke to Wolfgang Schüssel "as if you are on Jupiter", to ask him to show greater attachment to his beloved Europe). Social Democrat MEP Hannes Swoboda asked the Presidency to explain better the benefits of Enlargement, and non-attached member Andreas Molzer of the FPÖ wondered why "*Islamist Anatolia should be part of Europe*". This year, Mozart is being spoken of a great deal, but it could be better to speak of another Austrian, Sigmund Freud who taught us about '*inferiority complexes, frustration and narcissism*' (here with reference to the Council), said Social Democrat Maria Berger. The Green Johannes Voggenhuber attacked the lesson in harmony that the Austrian Presidency wanted to give, saying that its "*Magic Flute*" (the conference in Salzburg on "*The Sound of Europe*") couldn't cover the noise of the crisis (Mr Voggenhuber noted in passing that the Luxemburg Presidency had ended with Jean-Claude Juncker's great, almost desperate, speech, while the British Presidency had begun with Tony Blair's great, popularity-seeking speech).

On the Euro-sceptic side, French member of the IND/DEM group Patrick Louis paid tribute to Mr Schüssel for his lucidity when he denounced the excessive power of the European Court of Justice: the Court goes beyond the law in interpreting the Treaties, he opined, and he went on to ask the European Parliament to redefine the role of the Court. From the same group, the Lega Nord MEP Mario Borghezio lambasted States and argued for a Europe of peoples and regions: "*the symbolic town of Trieste should be the capital of the regions*" he said. Forza Italia MEP Antonio Taiani spoke out against "*internal attacks*" on the Union and external attacks (principally terrorist), while a member of the same EPP-ED group Françoise Grossetête (France) called on the Presidency not to forget important dossiers, such a paediatric medicines (a dossier with European value added, she stressed), and to be concrete and not let itself be carried away in lyrical flights. President of the Party of European Socialists Poul Nyrup Rasmussen wanted the Spring summit to try the "*new deal*" on a common growth strategy put forward by his group. Mr Rasmussen concluded by saying that if they succeeded, something that was possible, they would hear not only the "*Sound of Europe but also the sound of the people*" and it would be possible to talk again about the Constitution.

"We 're going to kill one another" at the next budget negotiations if the EU doesn't have more of its own resources, says Mr Schüssel.

Following the debate, Wolfgang Schüssel reiterated to reporters that he was for an increase in the EU's own resources. "If we don't start talking about the EU's own resources, we won't be able to reach agreement on the financial perspective for the period after 2014. If that should be the case, we're all going to kill one another during the next round of negotiations. I'm sure of it." Raising the EU's own resources is a "solution that every supporter of the European ideal has to accept", The Commission is due to make proposals during the 2008-2009 review "and I know that, on this subject, Mr Barroso is of the same opinion", said Mr Schüssel. "I agreed entirely", added EP President Josep Borrell. "We have to change the mindset with which members of the Council approach the budget. It's no longer possible to talk only in terms of net balances (...) That's crazy!" he said.

On the inter-institutional negotiations on the financial perspective, it will be "*very difficult*" to raise the global spending cap, but there is "*sole room for manoeuvre*" on the question of flexibility and measures of budgetary implementation, and "*in all these other areas* (apart from the overall ceiling) "*I am going to become very involved in order to achieve something together with the European Parliament*", said Mr Schüssel. The plenary's massive rejection of the political agreement with the European Council (see other article) "*is not a categorical refusal*" but the start of negotiations on not only the overall size of the budgetary framework, but also the rules for budgetary implementation and for flexibility, said Josep Borrell.

"We will speak to the Council in a positive spirit and with the best will to reach an agreement" he promised.

Speaking about enlargement, Wolfgang Schäussel welcomed the Commission's development of criteria to measure and assess the EU's absorption capacity. Since 1993, absorption capacity, although not one of the major criteria until now, has been one of the Copenhagen criteria for enlargements. Mr Schäussel stressed that it will have to be taken very seriously during the next accessions.

When asked about his recent comments on the extended competences of the European Court of Justice(see EUROPE 9101), the Austrian Chancellor that he, did not mean to undermine the importance of the Court, but he would like balance in its jurisprudence. "*In every Member State, the supreme court achieves this balance*"; a debate at legal level, therefore, was necessary to consider, for example, introducing transition periods on implementation of certain measures (see above)