



## Farewell to the United States of Europe: long live the EU!

### André Fontaine

*The experienced observer of French and European affairs sees the last fifty years as the pre-history of a loser, but real, European Union.*

**T**he debate about the future of the European Union – from enlargement to integration, from defence to the Euro – is sharpening in the approach to the forthcoming European Summit at Laeken (in Belgium) on 14 – 15 December. There, the assembled dignitaries will finalise a draft Declaration on the Future of Europe, the accumulative product of a Grand Tour around Europe’s capital cities by the Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt.

*This frenetic round of activity is on one level a sign of the continued energy of the European project, as the content and character of the forthcoming European constitution is shaped by a new political generation. But it is shadowed by a palpable sense of the absence of, and yearning for, greater citizens’ participation and transparency in the EU’s elusive democratic processes. And as the recent joint communiqué of the French President and German Chancellor in favour of a constitution indicated, national governments are still taking the lead in the debate. Is this simply the old Franco-German ‘engine’ of European*

*integration still seeking to run the show, or a new recognition that the grand dreams of a supra-national project are finally over?*

*André Fontaine, the distinguished former editor of Le Monde, has lived as well as studied at close hand the uneven road of European politics over the last half-century. No-one is better placed to judge the condition of the continent, its core institutions, and its democratic life on the eve of this critical period.*

Let us not deceive ourselves: the United States of Europe – that simplistic dream which has set the greatest minds on fire for more than two centuries – is dead.

It began with George Washington himself, when he wrote to Lafayette: “I am a citizen of the greatest Republic of Mankind. I see the human race united like a huge family by brotherly ties. We have made a sowing of liberty which will, little by little, spring up across the whole world. One day, on the model of the United States of America, a United States of Europe will come into being. The United States will legislate for all its nationalities.”



### France carries the baton

Subsequently, it would be the French above all who pursued that vision: Victor Hugo in 1848, Ernest Renan in 1871, the Radical Prime Minister Edouard Herriot in 1925, Aristide Briand, Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1929. But it was Winston Churchill, crowned with the prestige of victory, who re-launched that vision in September 1946. And it was Dwight Eisenhower who gave it American endorsement, when he became the first Commander-in-Chief of NATO's forces.

The first step towards it was taken in 1950 with the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community, under the impetus of Jean Monnet, commissioner of the Plan; Robert Schuman, France's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Konrad Adenauer, West Germany's Chancellor. The aim of the ECSC, which Italy and the Benelux countries had also joined, was to make it forever impossible for France and Germany to go to war. It did so by pooling the main resources required to produce armaments.

But the stakes were even higher than that: for this was the first step towards a federal state on the American model, a state with a supranational High Authority, a common parliament, on the model of the parliaments of the Member States, and a Court of Justice. The Gaullists and the communists saw where it was going and campaigned violently against the project. And Great Britain was not remotely tempted to take part: Europe was, at that time, something which was good for other people.

Scarcely had the ECSC been born when the Korean War posed the question of German re-armament in a concrete form. For it raised the spectre of an invasion of the Federal Republic of Germany by its little communist sister.

Washington was insistent that Germany should be re-armed. But five years after the capitulation of the Reich, the prospect was not well-received on the old continent.

### Monnet the visionary

Monnet, with his extraordinary dynamism, was convinced that it was possible to turn that negative into a positive. He proposed a project for a "European Defence Community", inspired by the ECSC, which would re-arm the Germans, rather than Germany. That was asking too much

of most Frenchmen. The idea of a European Defence Community was rejected by the Assemblée Nationale in the summer of 1954.

At the time, it looked as if this rejection would halt the growth of the European project. But Monnet's obstinacy swept all before it: in 1955 he launched an "Action Committee for the United States of Europe". He brought together the leaders of the political parties and trade unions of the six countries of the Coal and Steel Community. They

were also joined, soon afterwards, by those of Great Britain. The Gaullists and communists remained opposed, of course. And so, for some unexplained reason, did Pierre Mendes-France and François Mitterrand.

In 1957 the Treaty of Rome set up a "European Economic Community", which was destined to create a true common market between the Six. It also led to a "European Atomic Community" (Euratom), aimed at pooling the nuclear resources of the Six, at a time when the Suez crisis had highlighted the fragility of the West's supplies of hydrocarbons.

France's determination to equip itself with nuclear weapons would rapidly limit the activity of Euratom, to which Monnet attached the highest importance. But the policy of European

*Great Britain was not remotely tempted to take part: Europe was, at that time, something which was good for other people*



co-operation was re-launched when De Gaulle, who returned to power in 1958, embraced the common market. He was quick to recognise its capacity to stimulate the economy, and he was determined to join forces with Adenauer in order to keep Franco-German reconciliation on course.

That is not to say that everything ran smoothly between the Six. France, which had been cleverly managing to control the common agricultural policy (CAP) to its own ends, strongly rejected any modification of it, to the point of leaving its seat empty for a long time. And above all, the General opposed Great Britain's candidature, which was sought by the Conservative Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan. This was all the more significant since everybody knew that the latter had been put up to it by John Kennedy, who had been persuaded by Monnet that the Atlantic alliance should henceforth be based on two "pillars" – one American and one European.

### **Strength in numbers**

The other members of the common market, furious at De Gaulle's veto of Britain – which was, of course, spelled out in the most brutal way – torpedoed the French Fouchet Plan for the political unification of Europe on federal lines. This left De Gaulle and Adenauer no alternative but to conclude a bilateral "Elysee Treaty", which they did in 1963.

(Although the commitments involved were modest, this agreement led to a Franco-German leadership of Europe which lasted, to the great annoyance of the British and others, until the defeat of Christian Democrat Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, in the 1998 elections).

The General's disappearance from the scene rapidly calmed the debate. His successor Georges Pompidou was concerned to create a counterweight to Germany, whose reunification he regarded as inevitable. After a "meeting of minds" with Prime Minister Edward Heath, he raised the French veto on UK entry into the common market.

This took place in 1973, along with that of Ireland and Denmark. Norway, which was also granted entry, failed to ratify the treaty of admission. A further "enlargement" in 1978-79 took in Greece, Spain and Portugal. After the collapse of the Soviet empire, they were joined by three neutral countries: Austria, Finland and Sweden. Finally, the prelude to a Europe of Thirty Nations began at the start of 2001, when the Nice summit began negotiating the entry of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

France and several other member nations took the view that if an enlarged Europe were not to be condemned to ineffectiveness, its government would have to be strengthened. The most important reform required would be qualified majority voting, rather than unanimity, on certain subjects. This deepening had in fact already begun in 1997 with the introduction of universal suffrage in the election of the European Parliament, although using the method of proportional representation and choosing a national scale for them meant the elections were too often seen primarily as a test of national politics.

### **Beyond romance, necessity**

The most significant stage of this development occurred in 1990 with the reunification of Germany, when François Mitterrand managed

*Britain need no longer fear that her membership of the European Union will cause her to lose the identity of which she is so proud*



to persuade Chancellor Kohl that the Federal Republic's increased political and economic weight needed to be counterbalanced by a more closely integrated Community. The terms of the Maastricht treaty of 1992 picked up and amplified the Single Act of 1985. The European Economic Community was renamed the European Political and Monetary Union or more simply the European Union. It agreed, among other things, to introduce a single monetary system between the member states which would make all speculation impossible. This was a first step towards the introduction of a single currency, the euro, between those member states which wished to adopt it, and measured up to certain criteria. Only Great Britain, Sweden and Denmark remain outside it for the present, although Tony Blair, who seems in favour of joining, has mooted the possibility of a referendum on the subject in 2003.

What will become of this Union? The passionate debate of half a century ago has died down. Germany remains faithful to the federalist ideals of Monnet and Adenauer, although it has used the "principle of subsidiarity" to argue for the return of many matters to the national level. Jacques Chirac and Lionel Jospin have rallied to the formula coined by the former president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, of a federation of "Nation States", in which the term "Nation State" manifestly carries less weight than the word Federation. This formulation offers a double reassurance to Great Britain. It not only suggests that the Franco-German partnership which so irritated Margaret Thatcher is over, but that Britain need no longer fear that her membership of the European Union will cause her to lose the identity of which she is so proud.

There is another reason too why the ties between London and Paris seem likely to strengthen. Joint troop operations in the Balkans have revealed how much common ground there is between them. It is this which has made possible the creation of a "European army" of some tens of thousands of men, under the Saint-Malo treaty. This is an army quite unlike the one which the European Defence Community tried to form in the 1950s. For although that was "European" in name, its Commander-in-Chief would have been American. The Saint-Malo signatories have been at pains to reassure NATO regarding their co-operation with it. But the structure which they have undertaken to set up will be separate from the Atlantic supreme command.

A single currency; a small but separate army; the virtual disappearance of frontiers, the steady extension of areas of co-operation; the fusion of banking and industrial groups – little by little, Europe is coming together. This is certainly not a romantic process. But the fact that it is taking place with so little fanfare; that it makes so few waves, could well be the proof, if more proof is needed, of how necessary it is.

**28 November, 2001**

Copyright © Andre Fontaine, 2001. Published by [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net). Permission is granted to reproduce articles for personal and educational use only. Commercial copying, hiring and lending is prohibited without permission.

If this has been sent to you by a friend and you like it, you are welcome to join the openDemocracy network. To subscribe, please email your full name to: [subscribe@opendemocracy.net](mailto:subscribe@opendemocracy.net)

---

**André Fontaine**, born in Paris in 1921, has been associated with the leading French newspaper *Le Monde* since 1947. He was successively Foreign Editor and Chief Editor before election by his colleagues as Editor in 1985, until his retirement in 1991. He is now Advisor to the Editor, and writes for *Le Monde* and other papers. His works include histories of Détente and of the Cold War.