

No time for a meaner Europe

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The ideas at the origins of the European Union after the war were anything but mean: the big Never Again gave birth to a project with a vision. Reconciliation, cooperation, integration were notions used and enacted by post-war leaders to achieve what must have seemed almost impossible – transforming the relationship between those two sworn enemies, Germany and France, into the engine of European integration.

In practice this meant Anti-French propaganda had become part of German folklore, of everyday language and thought: the French were not to be trusted. In my part of Northern Germany, a particularly nasty garden weed, very difficult to eradicate, was called Franzosenkraut. In a popular rhyme the French figured as the “scumbag occupants of the Rhineland”.

Thanks to the new Europe a generation of German Francophiles grew out of this, studying French and travelling in France, for whom a close alliance with France became as natural as the federal structure of Germany. And in France a similar process turned the post-war generation if not into Germanophiles, then at least into people who saw Germany as a country you could live and do business with.

This high-minded spirit of Europe’s founding fathers was bolstered by the external threat of communism in the East. Everything that happened in Western Europe represented a positive counterbalance to the totalitarian negativity of the East. There was no choice, the project Europe had to succeed.

Over the last decade, after the disappearance of this external threat, the EU also seems to have lost its internal vision. Understandably, the focus shifted away from long-term goals onto the inner workings of the EU machinery, uncovering a democratic deficit that has found its expression in the Brussels bureaucracy and discussions on straight bananas.

Today the squabbling leaders of Nice and Laeken only seem to have one vision: how to secure the best for their own country, because this is how they will be judged by the media back home and by their electorates. Berlusconi’s nasty little jibes about other people’s cookery and the superiority of Christianity illustrate the meanness of spirit that now predominates – and the kind of Europe we might have to face.

All this when Europe is facing perhaps its greatest challenges ever, enlargement and globalisation, and when a sense of direction and a common vision are more essential than ever. To muster the energy and the political will to deal with these challenges we must turn back to the beginnings in the 1950s and learn a double lesson. The first one is that it is possible to transform adversity into opportunity and to lift people’s spirits against the odds. Secondly, Europe’s leaders have the duty to remind everyone of the dangers of new conflicts. Two generations of Europeans now no longer remember World War II, and are likely to feel safe for the wrong reasons. There is plenty of potential for conflict around – and it is not just limited to the accession countries.

In terms of Europe's role in the world, a mean Europe will be synonymous with Fortress Europe. It will be unable to embrace diversity, whether that of ethnic minorities in the old member states or the diversity of the accession countries, and unable to cope with the growing inequality between North and South. A mean Europe will be inward-looking and euro centric in the worst possible way, trying unsuccessfully to build walls high enough to protect itself from the outside world.

So there really is no choice: we need a new vision now, a generous, ambitious vision of which our children will be proud.

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