



by Enrico Letta

ON THE OTHER SIDE

## The Union? At differing speeds

**We are not dealing with a passing incident. We must really rethink the 14 years that separate us from Maastricht without preconceptions. Only thus will the process of unification be able to start off again on a more solid basis. To the idea – noble, but perhaps a little unrealistic – that it would be possible for everyone to move forward at the same rate...**

**T**he crisis in the European Union broke out suddenly. The effects have been profound and there is no indication that it has ceased to develop or that things have begun to get better. Indeed there is not even any indication that any proposals have been drawn up or are in the process of being developed that even come close to being shared about the future of Europe or the best way to handle the most delicate phase in its recent history.

By now there have been many stations on the European Calvary. The most obvious have been those of the French and Dutch referendums on the Constitution for the future Europe and the failure of the summit on the financial prospects for 2007 - 2013, which is even more delicate as it is linked to the functioning of the Europe of today and its budget. Even before that, Europe was divided on foreign policy, on relations with the United States and the war in Iraq in particular. The impression is strong that that division had an influence in creating a climate of reciprocal distrust that did not allow or rendered much more difficult progress that was already difficult towards finding solutions to the questions raised by the Constitution and the budget.

All this took place during semesters, the last presided over by Luxembourg, managed by presidencies that were strongly Europeanist and oriented towards finding agreements for the revival of the Union. It is therefore somewhat paradoxical to imagine that solutions that were not found then could be identified by the presidency of the Europe which is sceptic par excellence, Great Britain.

But what should be clear is that the crisis that Europe is going through is not like the others that have affected past decades. We are facing a crisis of meaning, of vocation. Europe is not asking itself about the policies it should propose, but about its very motive for existing. To brush aside the no of the French and Dutch referendums as a simple rejection of the Constitution would indeed mean not to observe the widespread malaise the citizens in these two countries wished to express. In fact, the electoral campaign in France and Holland did not focus on the terms of the European constitution and of the Europe outlined by that text and that are thus for now virtual. The debate and the rejection dealt with the Europe of today, the one that already exists. The by now famous Polish plumber will not operate in France on the basis of the Constitution should it be approved but of normatives that are applications of treaties already in effect.

The same applies to the rejection of the treaty on the Community budget. It is the ultimately impossible product of the efforts by the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Junker, designed to reconcile the Community spirit and the interests of the individual countries. Once the individual countries have become 25, the sum of their interests is not the same as the Community commitment, either from the perspective of quantity of financial resources or from that of the quality of the policies applied.

### **Not really the fault of the Euro**

The very exceptional character of the crisis Europe is experiencing makes it impossible to avoid a meticulous analysis and critique of the events that have unleashed over time the difficulties of today.

Several parties reduce the substance of the critiques to two major themes: the Euro and the enlargement. The former, the Euro, is certainly the most common explanation in Italy where a superficial analysis of its role in these years and the perception of the increase in prices during the change over have made it the defendant; in

fact, the Euro has saved Italy in these years, has protected it, when it could have been attacked in terms of the financial scandals that put its credibility to the test, because it has reduced the interest it paid on the debt, making it possible to decrease the public budget by approximately 40 billion Euros per annum.

In Europe, on the other hand, blame is usually laid on the enlargement. Accusations that are more emotional than rational have been concentrated on it too. It is difficult in fact not to take into account the modest quantitative impact of the new member states and of the many privileges granted to them at the time of their accession.

This search for a single culprit is profoundly mistaken.

Just as it is a mistake to identify the cause of all the evils in the written document in Maastricht. That document was valid. The political agreement based on it, fixed by the agreement between Kohl and Mitterrand and fruit of a time in which Europe had witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall and end of the divisions, was balanced. That political agreement was based on three major commitments: the Euro, the enlargement and political union. They had to march rapidly and together. One, the Euro, was written in the treaty. The second, the enlargement, was achieved by the political acts involved in the admission of East Germany into the Union through the association agreements with the other countries. The third, political union, was supposed, according to the Treaty of Maastricht itself, to have come in a new treaty to be concluded in 1996. The problems all lie in the implementation of this agreement. If the deadlines indicated in Maastricht were essentially respected with regard to the Euro, and the plans were executed with rapidity in line with the commitments taken, the same cannot be said of the other two commitments.

With respect to the enlargement, the different treatment shown for East Germany and the other candidate countries already gave an indication of a very complex road. But even in the case of the admission of the 10 member states in 2004, the difficult road and egoisms of the countries that were already members in setting conditions and delaying conclusion of agreements did not help find a solution.

The European governments, on the other hand, really failed in terms of the third objective. Political union, in fact, not only was not achieved but with the rejection of the Constitution it is put off further. The Intergovernmental conference that was supposed to complete the Maastricht

draft in 1996 was almost a complete failure. So much so that once signed the Treaty of Amsterdam resulted from it, the 15 began to speak immediately of the "left-overs" of Amsterdam that had to be completed in a later treaty. The latter, signed in Nice in the year 2000, once again postponed to a later date the moment of truth and we got to the current proposal of a constitutional treaty after the maximum period of time allowed. That is when the enlargement had already been completed and the vote on the Constitution had been so delayed in comparison with the timetable imagined in Maastricht that it encountered a climate that was completely different and further worsened by the crisis due to the war in Iraq.

In recent years, the Europeans have all tried to move ahead at the same speed. They did not pay any attention to whether the last cars were shaky or even slowing the train down. The fact that they never wanted to try out paths to differentiated integration seriously brought them to today's impasse.

Only if they start out by thinking about the 14 years that separate us from Maastricht, attributing blame and responsibility, will Europe be able to understand that without a solid and democratically accepted political union they will not be able to achieve even a common currency or a common foreign and defence policy. They must start again from there and probably from the knowledge that the Europe that has stopped today can only set off again with high ambitions at differing speeds.