



Letter from America: Europe is needed as never before

by David Miliband

Twenty years ago, Nick Butler and I conceived the CER as an antidote to the fustiness that we felt pervaded too much of the debate about the future of Europe – notably in London but also elsewhere. We felt that a new generation of Europeans, born after the war and ready to think in new ways about Europe, needed to make their voices heard. We were convinced that Britain could do better than fight a ‘beef war’, and that the EU would benefit from positive British engagement.

Fast forward 100 issues of the CER bulletin, and some things have changed. Enlargement has turned from dream into reality, and Europe is stronger for being wider. Just look at how policy on Russia is now much better balanced than it was 20 years ago. The euro has turned from dream into...well, into a huge challenge for millions of unemployed in southern Europe. Germany has moved from being a new country finding its feet to the first among equals.

The CER has proven itself to be ahead of its time, and ahead of the debate, on many issues, from economy to environment to crime to institutions. In 2000, its report ‘EU 2010: an optimistic vision of the future’ called for the creation of an EU foreign policy chief and an external action service, combining the resources of the European Commission and the Council of Ministers, to increase Europe’s heft in the world – and now they exist. Whatever the complaints about the current set-up, they are at least there to be improved. Every year from 2000 to 2010, the CER

published its ‘Lisbon scorecard’, analysing the progress – or lack of it – that EU governments had made in implementing their commitments on structural economic reform, undertaken in Lisbon in 2000; if governments had done more, the eurozone would be in a happier state today. In ‘Will the eurozone crack?’, in 2006, the CER forecast that the diverging competitiveness of northern and southern Europe would subject the eurozone to hugely painful stresses. The CER’s friends dismissed this as doom-mongering or ‘eurosceptic’ but in fact it was prescient.

I now live in New York and perhaps distance does bring perspective. For the American political and economic elite, European co-operation may be a disappointment, and sometimes a puzzle, but it remains a necessity. And while British euroscepticism may in some quarters be considered understandable, the europhobia that leads some people to advocate British withdrawal from the EU is perceived to be bizarre and dangerous. In the same way that

the threat of Scottish separatism crept up on Americans, producing genuine anguish, so the serious prospect that Britain might quit the EU is producing a similarly strong reaction. Across party lines in the US, the idea of a Europe without Britain is not attractive at all; and it must also be said, the idea of a serious Britain outside the EU is a non-starter.

Americans see that British membership of the EU has never been more fragile. It is striking how the frequent success of British negotiators over the past 20 years has gone side by side with polls showing that growing numbers of British people are alienated from the institutions of European co-operation. It is convenient for me to say that this is less about Europe and more about the economic and social challenges facing all mainstream parties in countries like the UK. However, the facts suggest that this statement contains much truth. After all, trust in national political institutions has fallen as fast over the last 20 years as trust in European institutions.

There are immediate crises to be addressed, from the euro to Ukraine. But the key long-term question is how the EU recovers its sense of purpose in the eyes of the people. This seems to me to require at least two things.

The first is that Europe needs to be about more than the euro. There needs to be an explicit and bold agenda for the Europe of 28 countries to pursue. This is not just for the obvious reason that it would be inclusive. An agenda for the 28 could soothe some of the divisions within the eurozone. It could link euro-outs like Britain, Sweden and Poland with euro-ins like Germany. It would foster new alliances.

The policy agenda for the 28 needs to go beyond the usual mantras of completing trade agreements and the single market in goods and services, important though they are. It is not my position now to advocate a comprehensive agenda, but there are some obvious candidates – a real energy union that integrates national systems, both boosting energy security and encouraging low-carbon power generation; a clampdown on tax avoidance; and a new neighbourhood policy that strengthens the southern and eastern neighbours – and thus Europe – without offering full membership.

In my own way, I see this opportunity for co-ordinated action among the 28 in the world of humanitarian relief which I now inhabit. The EU is the second largest humanitarian donor in the world after the US. It speaks for all its member-states, and augments bilateral assistance with institutionally powerful multilateral aid. It gives

a voice to people and crises that otherwise get forgotten – like the Central African Republic. And it backs aid with diplomatic, economic and in some cases military muscle. Europeans should be proud of this under-sung success story.

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There is a second imperative, which is in some ways paradoxical, since we currently need to maximise support for Europe from across the political spectrum. The imperative is that we should not see European politics only in terms of pro-European and anti-European. There needs to be a pro-European politics of the centre-left, and one of the centre-right. They would be united in supporting an expansive vision of the role of the EU in big global challenges, but advocate different recipes on economic and social questions.

I am a strong supporter of the agenda and positions set out by the Labour leadership. They are right that we need to be able to translate our values of social justice, economic empowerment and environmental sustainability into an agenda for the European level that brings hope to people. Such an agenda needs to be able to speak against austerity, for social norms, against discrimination, for equality of opportunity, and for a European role in helping bring these things about.

One can see the counter-narrative. It is that a retreat into nationalism is the best way to defend social norms. But it is false to pit patriotism against internationalism. We need to be able to make the opposite argument: that it is international engagement which makes national advance possible rather than defence necessary.

It has always struck me that Europe was most popular and effective when both centre-right and centre-left voters and leaders could see something of themselves in the European project. It would help to halt the decline of support for the European project if we could bring political values back into the debate. There always has to be an alternative, and Europe needs to be able to offer it.

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