

## **A radical cure for euro-paralysis**

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*June 5 2009*

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Since Barack Obama's election as US president, America's style of government has profoundly changed, in areas from energy conservation and social reforms to the ban on torture and the opening up to the Muslim world and Cuba.

Arrogance, myopia and the abuse of power have given way to seriousness, calm, a willingness to listen and plan for the long term. Democracy has allowed a peaceful transition away from a government with which people were not happy.

Could something similar happen in Europe? Could we, a year from now, see the 2009 European parliamentary elections as a turning point in the history of the continent? No divine curse or constitutional provision prevents this from happening. If it does not happen it will be only because of the laziness and indifference of Europeans themselves.

Consider a dream scenario. Let us imagine that the new European parliament were to decide that the economic crisis, the disintegration of the single market, the impotence of individual countries and the fragmentation of public spending in fields of common interest, meant a change in direction was required.

First, it would claim the right to choose the new president of the Commission (and the Commissioners). Prime ministers of member states would be told that the parliament would automatically use its veto on any name not previously agreed with the representatives elected by the people.

Second, the new parliament would call for immediate and radical reform of the European Union's budget and policies. Expenditures would be made flexible and discretionary, not rigidly partitioned by countries. There would be a truly European levy with new resources to implement common policies required by the ruling treaties.

The two moves would completely subvert the Union and block its functioning. All payments would be suspended, recipient countries would protest and there would be demonstrations in the streets. But, in this fantasy, MEPs would hold steady, parliament would not yield. Eventually, after months of paralysis, national governments and their Council – the coalition of the unwilling, the

huge table at which heads of state and prime ministers recite notes drafted by their officials – would understand that the game has changed. A new power would have risen in Europe.

Why go to such extremes? Because complete paralysis for a few months is better than the semi-paralysis in which Europe has been languishing for decades. A few countries would refuse the changes and decide to leave the EU, while preserving some of their links.

All this would take no longer than a year. And it is not totally implausible. It would not be a greater historic event than the unification of Germany in the 19th century or, in the 20th, the October Revolution, the end of colonialism or the collapse of the Soviet empire.

Few think such a European democratic revolt probable. I do not think it likely. But I think it could happen at some point, that it is desirable, and that people should know it is possible. I would like to see some politicians pin their fortunes on this eventuality, just as in the past some pinned them on the conquest of a united Italy, on universal suffrage or the abolition of slavery. As Mr Obama says, yes, we can.

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