

EUROPEAN UNION: TIME TO LEAVE THE PLAYGROUND

It has been a very rude awakening. While we are completing the unprecedented political enterprise to peacefully enlarge the European Union from 15 to 25 Member States, while we are preparing to welcome two more States by 2007 and while it is likely that a thirteenth candidate will join the Union around 2010, thus achieving, for the first time ever, the peaceful reunification of Europe, the United States have blown to pieces our ambition to offer a model of harmonious development to the peoples of the world.

Allow me first to say how immensely disappointed I feel. I was born a few days after the allied landings in Normandy, and have been liberated by the Allies a few weeks later. That is why I have always considered the United States as allies and have always considered myself as their ally. I have never imagined that one day they would give me cause for fearful concern. Today, this is the case and it saddens me, aggrieves me and disappoints me more than I can say.

As a European Union activist, as a national and European elected representative, as a Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, I have been deeply involved both with the institutional architecture of the Union and with enlargement. Like most of us, I expected the world to wait for us. Wasn't our grand undertaking the subject of much admiration from Asia to Africa, and from the Americas to Russia?

Then September 11 came. The Belgian government that was presiding the European Union sprung immediately into action and without hesitation the European Union joined the coalition against international terrorism.

I was in Casablanca that day, accompanying the Belgian Crown Prince Philippe at the head of an important trade delegation to the Kingdom of Morocco. I can testify to the immediate manifestations of Moroccan solidarity. In the ensuing weeks, the United States took the lead of a worldwide coalition against terrorism and international crime, as was soon demonstrated by the intervention in Afghanistan, which had been authorised by a United Nations Security Council resolution.

The speech of President Bush in West Point and his State of the Union address to the American Congress sounded the first awakening with their mentions of preventive strikes, the axis of evil (Iran, Iraq, North Korea) and rogue states. I wear myself trying to understand the reasons and motives for this ideological turn-around of the United States because neither the oil motive nor the alleged electoral reasons satisfy me.

They probably play a part, but the profound trauma caused by the attacks of September 11 undoubtedly plays a much bigger role. We Europeans, used as we are to be under attack and with memories of the last great war barely half a century away, have severely underestimated the depth of the trauma. We even may have

given the Americans cause to believe that we did not share in their grief and sorrow, or even worse, that we did not understand them. But even this does not fully explain the magnitude of the turn-around that literally beats me. Whatever the motives may be, the turn-around did upset the international coalition against terrorism and did shake the United Nations, the Security Council and the European Union.

The turn-around is such that it forces us to reposition ourselves as an individual nation, as a Member State of the European Union and as a Member of the United Nations. This time the bell really rang, the whistle was really blown, and the play hour is over. As the Americans say, now is the time to “get real”. The time has come to face the new reality and to stand up to the new challenges. What are they?

First and foremost we have to complete our great undertaking. The enlargement must be made to work in everyday reality and the institutions of the European Union must to be reformed by a profound revision of the Treaties. I think we would do well to reconsider all the recently raised issues in the light of what recently happened both inside and outside the European Union. Let us for instance ask ourselves whether the proposed reforms would have had an influence on the course of events and in what sense. Let us take, for example, the proposal of a full-time President of the European Council (Council of Heads of State and Government): would President Chirac, Chancellor Schroeder and Prime Minister Blair have remained silent if we had had such a President? Would they have remained silent even if such a President had been one of them? Of course not. I am referring to them because it was the divergence of their declarations in late August and early September of last year that brought in full view the deep European division on Iraq.

When the political will fails to let European unity prevail, when one does not even try to avoid a public display of disunity, then each and every institutional mechanism becomes inoperative. In other words, no format of Presidency, no institutional mechanism does by itself guarantee political unity.

We should not take offence at this, nor should we reconcile ourselves to it, but we should always take it into account. Let us modestly start by drawing a few lessons from these recent events. A code of conduct might be useful as well as an almost obligatory mechanism of communication and consultation whenever a crisis is imminent. Because, what do we observe right now? We see the leading actors meeting each other AFTER the crisis, when the damage has been done. Why haven't they met and talked before?

We will also have to ask ourselves what role we want the European Union to play on our own Continent and elsewhere.

We did raise these questions during the Laeken Summit at the end of the Belgian presidency, but the answers have been unsatisfying so far. I for one believe that the European Union should contribute to rebalance a world presently unhinged by the



willingness of the United States to bring into full play their supremacy so that their vision on the world may prevail.

Our outlook on the world is different, but until now we have only paid lip service to it. The fundamental challenge lies in the following questions. Will we be able to summon the courage to support our ambitions with the necessary political, financial and military means, or will we pare down our ambitions to the level of what we are willing to spare for them? Whatever the answer, it is now definitely time to leave the playground and to get to work.

A-M. NEYTS-UYTTEBROECK,
Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of Belgium.

Brussels, 24 April 2003.