

# UNITING for PEACE

Joint Event of Uniting for Peace & Edinburgh Peace and Justice Centre

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Theme: 'Britain and Brexit - Impact on World Peace'

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## Brian Cooper : What Future for Euro-Idealism?

### **BREXIT and EU's CRISIS**

A few days after UK's Referendum on EU membership, with Brexit causing shock waves across Europe, French foreign minister Jean-Marc Ayrault and his German counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier, met and together declared:

*"We must acknowledge that support and passion for our common project has faded over the last decade in parts of our societies."*

This significant admission, rather under-stated, was later followed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel's blunt statement: "The EU is in a critical condition." They were not only reacting to Brexit - which constitutes a huge crisis for the EU - but also expressing deep concern over the rise of anti-EU sentiment in many EU countries. This has several causes and manifestations: hostility in Central and Eastern Europe [especially Hungary and Poland] to Germany's 'open door' policy to Syrian refugees and German-driven EU attempts to impose

quotas of refugees on EU states; southern European hostility to EU-imposed austerity since the Eurozone crisis, especially over very high levels of youth unemployment; nationalist and anti-EU protectionist sentiment in France, especially voiced by the Front National; anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and nationalist movements in Germany, eg. Pegida and the Alternative for Germany party. Such movements reveal rejection of EU core values of tolerance, liberalism and internationalism.

## **ECONOMIC FAILURE**

Behind this widespread disenchantment with EU and questioning, even rejection, of some of its foundation values, is the negative economic experience of very many people across Europe after the 2008-9 economic crash and Eurozone crisis. Peace and prosperity were the twin foundation promises of the European Unity project, and they were fulfilled for over half-a-century. However, popular support for EU as the engine of economic prosperity for all its citizens - the material basis for the credibility of the EU system - has been hugely undermined both by the 2008-9 financial and economic crisis, and by the response of EU leaders and institutions. The imposition of austerity measures has worsened the personal circumstances of many EU citizens: Greece readily comes to mind, but other countries have suffered much, too. The Euro-crisis revealed fundamental flaws in the Euro-scheme - and brought into question EU's embrace of neo-liberal economics and globalisation. **The EU promise of advancing general prosperity has currently failed - so gravely weakening popular support for the ideal of ever-closer European Unity. Whether this is temporary or will be more lasting remains unclear.** Certainly the economic competence of the Euro-elite has been thrown into severe doubt.

## A 'SOUL FOR EUROPE'

These current political, social and economic phenomena point to **widespread deep questioning even abandonment of the European ideal**: that ever-closer European union and co-operation would achieve ongoing, even permanent, European peace and prosperity. *Is there more to the current Euro-crisis than simply economic failure and the mass immigration problem? I think so.*

In early 1990s, Jacques Delors, then European Commission President, declared:

*"Unless Europe finds a soul, it will have no future...Then the game will be up."*

He recognised economic prosperity could never be enough to secure the success of the European project, and that fundamentally it needed to embrace shared ethics and values, affirm Europe's common cultural heritage, build a 'social Europe' of high social benefit for EU citizens, and promote peace and human rights in Europe and globally. Delors believed Europe could only be soundly and securely built if it were motivated by a shared moral, even spiritual, vision. He wanted a revival of the original Euro-idealism of the EU's founding fathers of the 1940s and 1950s, who in their turn had drawn inspiration from an earlier era of European unity - mediaeval Christendom. Then [western] Europe was united by a common Catholic faith, Latin as a common language of learning and other cultural factors. Schuman, Monet, de Gasperi, Adenauer and other post-1945 European leaders were mostly Catholic, some devoutly so, and forged a new European Unity vision and reality, expressing their Christian Democracy ideals - to cleanse Europe of the moral pollution of Fascism, oppose Communism, and achieve lasting

reconciliation of former enemies especially France and Germany, with material basis in economic co-operation. In these high aims, practically expressing the Christian principle of reconciliation, they were very successful.

## **UK: FAILURE OF EURO-IDEALISM**

In the UK Referendum debate, the Remain campaign made little appeal to Euro-idealism, little reference to European Unity as an idealistic yet supremely practical project - successful for some six decades - for European peace and prosperity. Its arguments were primarily economic; the Brexit campaign dismissed EU's peace-making achievement.

**This failure to proclaim 'Euro-idealism' in the Referendum campaign was not a one-off: *it continued the persistent and fatal failure of the UK political elite [both Labour & Conservative] to proclaim the European ideal, to declare UK fully 'European', and commit UK to the European project of ever-closer union.*** Politically, Edward Heath was only UK prime minister who really understood 'the European vision' and was totally committed to it. For all talk of 'Britain being at the heart of Europe' [Major, Blair], UK often sought opt-outs, was not in Schengen or the Euro, etc. In 1973 UK joined 'the Common Market' - and UK political thinking never got much beyond that. UK citizens were never generally persuaded - apart perhaps from the younger generation - they were EU citizens as well. UK has lacked EU 'signs and symbols': few public buildings fly the EU flag, Europe Day [May 9] is not celebrated, Europe events rarely held. So UK never came 'to feel European' in the way that Germany, France, Italy etc. do.

## **TOWARDS A NEW EURO-IDEALISM?**

European Union was the most noble political project of 20th-century, expressing a genuine 'Euro-idealism' - but UK never fully signed up to it. For Europe generally, that foundation era is long gone; today Euro-idealism is gravely eroded ; could it be re-built?

It is possible, and would be hugely beneficial for international co-operation, but will not be easy. A new Euro-idealism cannot be confined to EU states, but must embrace UK, non-members, applicant states, periphery countries like Belarus - and include Russia. It would be pragmatic, focusing on co-operation on common problems: climate change ; energy security ; a coherent security and aid policy towards North Africa/Middle East; tackling terrorism; wealth creation and job creation to make Europe prosperous again ; rejection of neo-liberalism ; re-thinking globalisation; creating a mutual security area in Europe, with detente with Russia; use of 'soft power' by EU and non-EU states for conflict prevention and development, making a distinctive European contribution to global peace-building.

A new Euro-idealism requires political leadership both visionary and dynamic: at present that appears to be lacking, thus making civil society engagement all the more urgent. The Conference of European Churches, representing churches of all denominations across Europe, is currently engaged in an all-Europe consultation on 'building a community of values" in Europe. Such should be the aim of a new Euro-idealism.

**Rev. Brian Cooper**

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