

REDESIGNING THE EUROPEAN PROJECT TO IMPROVE EMPLOYMENT AND DEMOCRACY?

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Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute and the European Movement - France organised the sixth debate in the cycle entitled “Right of inventory - Right to invent: 60 years of Europe, successes worth keeping - solutions yet to be invented” in Orléans on 9 April 2014, allowing the audience of citizens to address the following issue: “Democracy and employment: challenges for the European Union (EU)”.

Stéphane De Laage opened the debate by recalling the importance of using the democratic tools at our disposal, including the 25 of May, when we go to the polls and decide what kind of EU we want. Virginie Timmerman, project manager at Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute - presented the “Right of inventory - Right to invent” cycle for which citizen debates were held in the eight French European Parliament constituencies, addressing four major issues: democracy, employment, the euro and globalisation. The dialogue, moderated by Stéphane De Laage, freelance journalist and director of RCF Loiret radio, then continued with the audience and the following guests, who were divided around two panels:



Employment: which solutions are needed ?

With the following speakers:

- Xavier Beulin, president of the FNSEA¹ and CESER² (Centre region)
- Gérard Gautier, president of the CGPME³ in Loiret
- Karine Gloanec-Maurin, vice-president of the Centre region
- Wojtek Kalinowski, co-director of the Veblen Institute

What democracy for European citizens ?

With the following speakers:

- Sophie Auconie, member of the European Parliament
- Jessica Chamba, vice-president of the European Movement - International
- Jean-Pierre Sueur, senator for Loiret
- Jozef Niemiec, vice-president of Solidarnosc and the European trade union confederation

1. Employment : the need for cooperation-based employment policies

Employment - and particularly unemployment - is a problem in every EU country today; it creates a harmful social climate and increased gaps in wealth and living standards.

Wojtek Kalinowski remarked that the crisis - which is not over - has hit individual countries differently. All speakers agreed that economic recovery is needed to solve the problem of unemployment.

Karine Gloanec-Maurin and Xavier Beulin pointed out that the EU lags far behind in employment policy as a result of the Union's incomplete implementation of its economic ambitions.

It is commonly acknowledged across the EU that both ultraliberalism and extreme socialism should be avoided, but such a consensus does not indicate what approach should be taken (Wojtek Kalinowski). National self-interest and a lack of cooperation is creating “unhealthy” distortions (Xavier Beulin) which sometimes place certain countries at an advantage and preclude any European added value. Sustainable development is imperative and helps override this traditional debate. The notion of depleted natural

resources, and of coordinating economic, environmental and social policies – which are still dealt with separately – must be integrated into policy and ways of thinking (Wojtek Kalinowski). Means and ambitions must be pooled, not only to reduce inequalities between countries but also to support EU-wide progress (Xavier Beulin).

Employment policy is not the province of the EU, but the crisis has made it necessary to address the issue of employment at the European level (11% of the EU's active population – 27 million people – are unemployed). Levers can be developed at this level to incite member states to invest in innovation, progress and research to relaunch an economy which must also be re-industrialised (Karine Gloanec-Maurin). Progress in Germany on the minimum wage shows that European incentives can have positive knock-on effects in member states, including “winners’ club” countries (Wojtek Kalinowski). Concerns about posted workers must be heard and addressed. A clear definition of fiscal dumping is needed. A practice which, it should be remembered, is most common among large companies, who take advantage of a system that must be improved to prevent abuse (Karine Gloanec-Maurin and Gérard Gautier).

Gilles, a business owner, pointed out that the crisis is primarily attributable to banks and the world of finance. As a result, he wondered what power political leaders have over the world of finance and big business, which exploit the advantages of the single market, particularly where employment is concerned. Gilles, secretary-general of the Loiret branch of the CFDT labour union⁴, stressed that the unanimity rule is a significant hindrance to European ambitions. A commitment to fiscal and social harmonisation is gaining ground in pro-European parties, as evidenced by the adoption of a tax on financial transactions by 11 EU countries⁵ (Karine Gloanec-Maurin and Jozef Niemiec). A similar process is underway to deal with tax havens. Thankfully the unanimity rule is no longer an obstacle to taking a great number of decisions in this domain. It is true, however, that the European Commission sometimes rejects proposals made by local players – regional authorities, for example – which are based on local consultations and therefore meet clearly identified needs. This blockage prevents certain local representatives from carrying out their role (Karine Gloanec-Maurin). The power of the European Parliament is also relative: the strategy of blocking the budget, for example, seen in 2013, only worked for a time; the budget could not be blocked indefinitely (Jozef Niemiec).



2. Democracy: perfecting European democracy ?

Interest in democracy appears to progressively wane with every European election, characterised by record levels of abstention (Stéphane De Laage). When the vote – the most basic democratic act – is not used, what democracy for European citizens ?

For most Europeans, democracy is earned, and we need “Ukrainian stories” to be reminded that elsewhere, the values that go with it are still a purpose of combat.

The EU protects its citizens, even if it is young and can still improve. The chosen model could be better but is a “vital necessity” (Sophie Auconie). The “small steps” method was a necessity after World War II but in the 1980s, during enlargement – which was needed – the full scope of the institutional measures to be implemented was not grasped. The EU now “carries this institutional burden”, incomprehensible to citizens, who reject it (Jessica Chamba).

It would be incorrect to say that the EU is not democratic, however, on the basis that “Brussels” decides on everything (Xavier Beulin and Jessica Chamba). The Commission does initiate European legislation but this is approved by the EU Council and European Parliament. Ministers represent member states through the Council, and the Parliament represents citizens, making both democratic institutions (Jessica Chamba) that are accountable.

One major barrier to the visible democratisation of European affairs is the lack of debate on the content of European policy, even during European elections. In France, political parties view the European elections as second-rate; a place to recycle or punish political figures who are not suited at all for their European mandate. To a large degree, the elections are reduced to a referendum on the government in power (Sophie Auconie and Jean-Pierre Sueur).

However, the innovative feature of the Treaty of Lisbon, which confirms the need for a link between the majority in the Parliament and the President of the European Commission, should allow a politicisation and European policies and ideas to take form. Should heads of state and government decide to disregard this, it is the European Parliament's responsibility to overrule any decision which contradicts the goals of this measure (Sophie Auconie). Such a politicisation must be followed by actual, concrete policies aside from the CAP (Xavier Beulin, Jozef Niemiec) – industrialisation and research policies, for example.

Furthermore, European democracy is also played out in national parliaments – in the French National Assembly and Senate for example – where commissions handle European affairs and transpose EU legislation into national legislation (Jean-Pierre Sueur).



Lastly, European democracy can also be built in the street. Unions can encourage citizens to voice their concerns and demands regarding European construction to national governments (Jozef Niemiec).

Christophe suggested a triple-play approach to improving European democracy: “European programmes for European elections; a European executive which stops passing laws (the Parliament would be the only body empowered to do so); and the greater involvement of national parliaments in law-making”. For Dominique, a single euro-conscription would be a huge step forward.

Involving national parliaments is a good idea, but it is important to note that implementing transposed legislation requires means which national institutions aren't always ready to commit. The idea of a single euro-conscription was presented, by Andrew

Duff, for example. It would, indeed, make a European politicisation possible. Quotas are needed, however, to ensure that across regions, candidates are heard and readable (Jessica Chamba and Sophie Auconie). The real goal, in fact, is to truly influence European legislation when it is created. France typically reacts to directives over which it has held little influence, while the British are more inclined to shape a text that is then easier to transpose (Jessica Chamba).

As for democratising EU institutions by using languages other than English, as suggested by Marcelle, candidate for the “Europe, Democracy, Esperanto” party, though it would be ideal to translate everything in 12 hours, in the short term and in the interests of efficiency, English is the best solution (Sophie Auconie). It should be noted, however, that texts and discussions are quickly and systematically translated so that all may participate.

3. Citizenship: redesigning the European project ?

Philippe, a university professor, points to the lack of a major European project as the main cause of citizen apathy and disinterest in the EU. For Guy, Peace is not enough – a new European project is needed.

The founding fathers deserve credit for 60 years of peace in the EU (Karine Gloanec-Maurin). Globalisation has turned individual countries into mere confetti on their own, but the EU has made it possible for our voices to be heard (Sophie Auconie and Xavier Beulin).

Nevertheless, the first 60 years of European construction gave a decidedly economic dimension to the European identity which neglected the notion of progress and equality between countries which inspired the founding fathers. The point is not to move away from “flesh and blood” Europe (Karine Gloanec-Maurin) but to develop a new citizen agenda that overtakes institutional debate (Wojtek Kalinowski).

Several suggestions were made. Philippe advocated a relaunch of major European research projects given the financial and political means they need to succeed. The EU is on the cutting edge of progress in environmental matters, but needs to improve its application of the standards and values it defends in this area (Xavier Beulin). The EU must propose a

“fair [ecological] transition” and give new hope to EU citizens (Jozef Niemiec).

On a more practical level, European twinning schemes should be promoted to give new meaning to the European project across regions (Karine Gloanec-Maurin). Providing information to young people is essential, as textbooks do not present the EU as a unifying project (Xavier Beulin).

Such strategies need top-tier political leaders who can carry EU ambitions. All speakers agreed that no

one since Jacques Delors has been capable of promoting such a project. The fault lies with heads of state and government who do not want a “super Delors to upstage them” (Xavier Beulin).

Influential voices are needed to seek out not more or less Europe but a “better Europe” (Xavier Beulin) to put citizenship and democracy back at the heart of the European project.

Photos and podcast of the debates are available on our website.

1. National Federation of Agricultural Holders' Unions – France's biggest agricultural union
2. Regional economic, social and environmental council
3. General Confederation of Small and Medium Companies
4. National French workers' confederation
5. The position taken by French MEPs on this issue is examined in: “Faces on divides: the May 2014 European elections”, Yves Bertoncini et al., *Studies & Reports No. 104, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014.*

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