

Leadership vacuum at heart of EU exposed: The crisis precipitated by the failure of EU leaders to...

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Leadership vacuum at heart of EU exposed

The crisis precipitated by the failure of EU leaders to agree should not be underestimated, writes John O'Brennan

The dramatic failure of last weekend's European Council summit has sent shock waves around Europe and thrown into doubt the future political shape of the continent. It exposed the great fragility of the European compact, revealed a leadership vacuum at the heart of the EU, and vastly complicates the Union's ability to cope with the accession of 10 new member-states next May.

The disaster has been a long time coming. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet bloc the EU proclaimed itself willing to enlarge to central and eastern Europe, and export the peace and prosperity which the integration process had delivered in western Europe.

At the Copenhagen European Council summit in June 1993, candidate states were set a list of non-negotiable criteria for membership, stipulating the need for market reforms, liberalisation of their economies, the need for representative government and transparent institutions which guaranteed minority rights and fundamental freedoms.

But the EU also set one other criterion for membership, which was unrelated to the ability of the

candidate states to achieve reform. That criterion was the ability of the EU itself to absorb new members "whilst maintaining momentum towards European integration".

This meant that the EU had to effect both institutional and policy changes in advance of accession to ensure that enlargement would not paralyse the internal workings of the Union. For their part the candidate states have engaged in almost Herculean feats of reform in their successful effort to meet the Union's criteria. It is the EU that has failed to deliver.

The fact that the newly-acceding states have played a full part in negotiations on the constitution does not negate the primary responsibility of the existing member-states for the failure to deliver institutional reform.

The Polish government effectively sold EU membership to its citizenry on the basis of the deal agreed at Nice. To now ask the Poles to accept a new distribution of power in the council, which would fundamentally disadvantage them relative to Nice, would immediately delegitimise the EU and Polish membership in the eyes of the people who voted for

accession on the basis of the Nice arrangements. How could any Polish government go back to its people and ask them to endorse something fundamentally less generous than that which they had voted for only months ago?

The Brussels summit represents only the latest in a long line of failures to address the questions of institutional balance, power and efficiency in the enlarged Union. Time and again the EU pretended to face up to the implications of enlargement and failed to deliver the re-calibration necessary to ensure a workable order.

Thus we witnessed an avalanche of grandiose rhetoric about institutional reform at Amsterdam in 1997 and Nice in 2000, but little of actual substance.

The failure of last weekend's summit therefore should be viewed in the context of long-standing disagreements about the distribution of power in the Council of Ministers, and not specifically as a function of disagreement on the constitution.

The summit failure should also be viewed as part of another discernible feature of the approach to enlargement. That is the hesitancy and lack of generosity on the part of the EU towards the candidate states in evidence for over a decade. Despite the dizzy rhetoric of EU leaders in the early 1990s about reuniting the European family, the extent of support offered the transitioning countries

was very limited.

The Union, caught out by the suddenness of the Soviet collapse and preoccupied with the deepening of integration, pursued an ad-hoc and fragmented enlargement policy characterised by protectionism and a paucity of financial aid. Indeed, nothing resembling a Marshall Plan emerged from EU policy. The Brussels summit was just the latest manifestation of this.

The summit revealed something else. That is the extraordinary leadership vacuum at the heart of the Union. The obsession with defending national interests, of setting "red lines", and presenting analysis of what emerges from negotiations simply in terms of the defence of those red lines has been apparent for some time.

It is a trend that has accelerated and now dominates the negotiating landscape of the EU. It flies in the face of the interdependence that actually forms the defining characteristic of inter-state relations in modern Europe.

And, where previously it represented a somewhat benign manifestation of the continued tension between the national and supranational levels of decision-making in Europe, it now constitutes a cancerous growth in the European diplomatic mindset and threatens to reverse the achievements of the integration process. It has been allowed to grow because of the unwillingness

to demonstrate leadership. Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac, and Gerhard Schröder compare badly to Helmut Kohl and Francois Mitterand, who, at important junctures, were willing to place the European compact before narrowly defined national interests.

More than ever the world needs the post-war European model of inter-state co-operation manifested in the institutional structures and policy-making approach of the Union. That model, characterised by multilateralism, tolerance and respect for international law, is challenged by the Bush administration.

That Hobbesian world which increasingly resembles the old 19th century world of power politics is one that the European states cannot contemplate a return to.

The member-states, should they fail to re-engineer the structures which support their inter-state relations and deliver a distribution

of power that facilitates decision-making in an enlarged Union, are staring into an abyss of fragmentation and ultimately collapse of the integration process. That is a sobering thought as we face into the Irish presidency.

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