

3. Europe beyond the current frames

Speech by the vice-president of the Dutch Council of State, J.P.H. Donner, at the Sharing Europe Congress in the Ridderzaal in The Hague, the Netherlands

Three score and ten years ago our fathers came here to discuss their vision of the future. Europe had barely survived two world wars in one lifetime. Millions of displaced persons were on the move. Violence was still rampant in many parts of Europe. All European nations faced the immense task of reconstructing society from the ruins of absolute war. And over it all lay the shadow of yet another totalitarian regime that threatened to engulf Europe.

Our forebears met, not as representatives of nations or heads of state, but as representatives of all sections of society, in search for mutual comfort and support. They came with an idea: to unite Europe, and they left with hope. 'We cannot aim at anything less than the union of Europe as a whole' thus Churchill captured the spirit of the moment.

Much has been achieved since then. But words and good intentions were not enough. Two years later the feeling of despondency was even deeper and there was a growing sense that war, once again, was inevitable. It needed a bold step to break out of the mould of national thinking. The agreement to put the coal and steel industry, the powerhouse of national economies, under a common administration, turned a zero sum stalemate into a non-zero sum dynamic. That started the miracle of a deeply fractured continent, boiling over with mistrust, hatred and painful memories, turning itself into a striving area of prosperity, democracy, open society and the rule of law.

Now, seventy years later, we have come back here to the same place; to commemorate, but also to reaffirm the spirit of that time. Our material situation has improved beyond what was imaginable for our forebears, but in some ways we are as confused as they were. We find ourselves once again in a stalemate. The long period of peace, prosperity, growth and expansion of the European Union that culminated in the years after the fall of communism, has soured in ten years of stagnation and crisis. Social and economic differences are increasing, people feel insecure and threatened and the Union seems impotent to act and to offer protection. Growing segments of the electorate are turning towards the pied pipers of nationalism, closed borders and national control, that have sprung up all over Europe.

In a growing number of member states the debate over how to meet the daunting challenges of climate change, of limited natural resources, growing social differences, security threats and of a digitised society, is drawn into the false antithesis of national autonomy versus European cooperation. The originality of the European construction was and is that member states and the Union mutually reinforce each other. The driving force behind the European project was not the ambition for power but the increasing awareness of the powerlessness of national states in the face of international markets and a cross border society. Take European cooperation away and these shortcomings and limitations will soon reappear. Sovereignty is a hollow concept in a world where each state is dependent on others for its prosperity, security and viability of policies. Reasserting autonomy will not solve anything but only adversely affect the capacity of

both the Union and its member states to cope with the challenges of modern society. If European cooperation would disappear it will not result in the reappearance of viable national states, but in general impotence and the marginalisation of all European states.

It is not just prosperity and stability that are at stake, but open society, cultural diversity and the rule of law itself. Mutual relations between autonomous national states are governed by might instead of right. National states that are in constant need to compete with their neighbours, will try to assert political unity and social conformity over democratic and cultural diversity. Economic interests and the fears of popular majorities will easily take precedence over individual rights, ethnic diversity and the interests of minorities. These 'darker' tendencies in society have been kept in check by common purpose, mutual trust and common institutions of the rule of law: the European Courts, the Charters and the European legal order. However these run the risk of being among the first victims if states revert to national autonomy, as we can see happen even now in some Member States. Even in the United Kingdom it seems as if the single most important issue in the Brexit negotiations is how to get away from the jurisdiction of the Court in Luxemburg.

But the essence of Europe is not institutions or markets; the essence is people. The hope that was kindled seventy years ago was not for an institutional construction nor for free markets and profits. The hope that was born, was for a future in which all Europeans for the first time in living memory could live their lives free of fear and want, free to express their opinions and convictions and free to move around, meet, get to know each other and cooperate across frontiers. As Monnet wrote: '*Nous ne coalisons pas des Etats, mais nous unissons des hommes*' ('we are not federalising states, but we are uniting people'). Europe has realised that hope in many respects; prove of which is the long period of peace, stability and growing prosperity; prove of which are the people that circulate daily in the European Union, students that travel abroad, workers that find employ elsewhere, friendships, marriages and contacts across borders; prove of which is this conference itself and your presence here. But for too long the realisation of the hope and dreams of that earlier time has been left to national governments and national politics to implement. We thought that once the process was got going, Europe would realise itself on its own, because the logic and the benefits would be self-evident.

However, Europe isn't realised by itself. As the Americans say: if it is to be, it is up to me, if Europe is to be, it is up to each one of us. We are the bearers of the hope that was born seventy years ago. It is up to us to cherish the hope in our generation and to pass it on to future generations. Europe is too important an idea to leave it in the care of governments and politicians to implement. That doesn't mean that we can do without national governments and politics, nor that there are easy recipes or simple solutions. But it starts with the recognition at all levels of society, that European cooperation is not part of the problem as an unwanted restriction on national policy, but part of the solution of the many challenges we face in a modern society; part of the protection people are looking for, part of the opportunities modern technology offers, and part of the guarantee of an open society and the rule of law. That was the idea behind the meetings yesterday; to discuss in what way cooperation can solve problems. It is now up to all of us to practice that approach in our professional life. And it is up to us to challenge the misinformation that is often spread around about the restrictive nature of European cooperation. There is often much more leeway than is used by national

governments; the only real restriction being that a member state may not promote its own interests at the expense of others. And that is precisely what will happen, if European cooperation would fall away.

One of the area's where European cooperation urgently has to show to be part of a solution, is the area of growing social differences both within member states and between them. Growing numbers of people fall behind in the general growth of the economy and have lost faith in their capacity to improve their situation. Economic reports indicate that differences between segments of society and between regions are growing; in the level of work, income, health education. It would seem to imply that our economies are no longer helping social cohesion but effecting the opposite.

Understandably the victims of this lopsided growth feel betrayed in their hope for a better and secure future, and turn against European cooperation which they associate with free markets and free movement. A disenchantment that can easily be exploited by national populist politicians, even though the fastest growth of differences occurs within the separate member states, and only joint action at European level offers any hope of finding an adequate answer. But such an answer has to be found if we want to turn the tide of anti-European feeling.

These and other challenges we face are not simple problems that have an easy answer. And if we have an answer, it will be even harder to have it accepted and implemented. But the problems our fathers faced when they met here seventy years ago were even more daunting – and they didn't have the reassuring experience of sixty years of successful cooperation. Yet they went from here with a sense of common purpose and hope in their hearts; the hope for a future in which all Europeans could enjoy a life in liberty, security and prosperity free from fear and want.

If they could find the strength to take up their responsibility, could we do less? Our material conditions have improved radically. And while our forebears had to take up the challenge of constructing Europe in a continent that was destroyed by war and divided by barbed wire, hatred and mistrust, we live in a world where we profit from sixty years of trust and peaceful cooperation and where we have all the possibilities we want to move around, meet who we want and cooperate with anyone we like. That is the solid basis on which a European future can be built - has to be built.

So let us honour the pioneers of Europe who met here seventy years ago by reaffirming their commitment to the hope of a united Europe. Hope in that deep sense of which Vaclav Havel said that it is 'a state of the mind, not of the world'. Not the joy of things that are going well, or the willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but it is rather the ability to work for something because it is good. Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

That is the hope we should carry from here.