WHERE NEXT FOR EUROPE? (25/06/02)

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WEDNESDAY 25 JUNE 2002

With the prospect of agreement at the end of this year to enlarge the European Union to 25 or more States, now is a good time to pause and reflect on where Europe goes from here.

The European Union has been through periods when it has appeared focussed and dynamic and others when it has appeared to have lost its way. In the early days, there was a clear mission. To create a new structure for working together in Europe – a unique balance between national and supranational arrangements. To make war impossible in Europe – a continent where more wars have been fought than anywhere else in the world.

In the latter half of the eighties we were focussed on creating the single market which has been hugely beneficial for jobs and prosperity throughout Europe.

But more recently, people have lost a sense of what Europe is for. In the last few months, many voted for anti-European parties.

So we need to offer people a new sense of Europe’s purpose. We need to reconnect Europe to its people. This means identifying what people expect from the institutions which govern them; acknowledging that they will look principally to their national Governments to deliver answers; but demonstrating that co-operating with European partners in many policy areas can add value; and, where it does, that a willingness to pool sovereignty is in the national interest.

It means creating a new delivery-oriented EU. Identifying and focussing on the policy areas where the EU can contribute. And creating a decision-making framework to drive this through in an efficient, democratic and transparent way.

CRIME AND IMMIGRATION

Take crime and immigration. These are now top of people’s agendas. The failure of some European governments to deal adequately with them has been a key factor in the success of far right parties in recent elections.

Tackling them is partly a domestic policy matter for national Governments. But there is also a strong European dimension.

Immigration is by definition international. We have to work with others to deal with it and in particular our nearest neighbours.

So we are working together in Europe on a common agenda with four key aims. Firstly to better protect genuine refugees from tyranny. Secondly to reduce the burden of illegal immigration. Thirdly to use immigration in a managed way to fill gaps in our respective labour markets. Fourthly
to fight racism and xenophobia.

We have recently agreed an agenda on a common asylum policy. This means common standards for receiving asylum seekers arriving anywhere in Europe and common procedures for dealing with their applications. We agreed to enforce more effectively the principle that an asylum seeker’s application should be dealt with in his or her first country of entry to the European Union. To stop different Member States from thinking they can just shovel off their immigration problems onto their neighbours by turning a blind eye to those who are just passing through.

Europe also agreed to use its collective economic and political weight in our relations with the major source countries. Firstly to tackle the root causes of mass economic migration: providing development assistance, lifting debt, opening up trade and dropping protectionist barriers which block agricultural exports from developing countries. And secondly to use the policy tools we have to encourage them to take back asylum seekers whose claims fail.

And we also agreed to work together to strengthen Europe’s external border. Weak EU borders lead to problems down the line. We agreed to identify the weakest points and treat them as a common problem through sharing personnel, equipment, training and best practice.

This is not about ‘Fortress Europe’. But if we fail to manage the mass flow of illegal migration we will destroy the consensus in Europe that we should both provide refuge for those genuinely fleeing persecution and welcome migrants filling gaps in the labour market opening up, in part, because of Europe’s ageing population.

If human trafficking is international and therefore needs confronting at a European level, so is general crime. The drugs that fuel crime on the streets of one European country will often have been supplied by organised criminal networks operating in others. The traffickers behind much of the human misery of illegal immigration are the same. The money that is their lifeblood will have been laundered through accounts internationally.

For too long, international criminals have been one step ahead of the forces of justice in exploiting the ease of international travel and the political reach of modern communications. Because of our different histories, many of our European partners have different judicial systems. This has sometimes made Member countries reluctant to co-operate in investigations. At other times, countries have been too bogged down in bureaucracy to fight crime together; and factors such as banking secrecy have got in the way of sharing evidence necessary to convict criminals.

We need our police and prosecuting authorities to be able to co-operate across European borders as easily as, say, between the different jurisdictions within the United Kingdom. Not through the creation of a single legal system. But based on mutual recognition of each others’ systems.