Foreword

Securing Europe's Fate: A Task for Citizens and for Politicians

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European politics are always evolving, and politicians, in the European Parliament and elsewhere, have to adapt to that evolution. But the rise of participatory democracy has presented Europe's politicians with an entirely new challenge. The readiness of so many of today's citizens to articulate their own political ambitions, coupled with the availability of increasingly influential new channels of communication, has radically changed the context within which policy discussion and policy formation take place. At its best, this can offer the political class the opportunity of a new and vibrant interaction with the electorate. But it can also rather awkwardly result in a myriad of competing and even conflicting demands for action. Politicians at the EU level today are confronted with a complex patchwork of interests and claims for attention, and frequently find themselves with real difficulties in reconciling them.

The results of this surge of a new form of fragmented and highly diverse advocacy are clearly visible in the tectonic shifts now emerging across the traditional political divides. Voter support has become highly volatile as older affiliations fade, presenting opportunities for new political formations that aim to provide different answers to the challenges faced by society. Exemplified by the political changes in Greece, France, the UK, or the Nordic countries, the turmoil has often produced sharp swings between the extreme left and the extreme right, or given rise to a multitude of new micro-parties. But the struggles that many of these new parties and groupings have also faced in trying to implement new policies that satisfy their supporters once they gain some power demonstrate clearly just how huge the task has become for politicians of all stripes.

The current political scene is characterized by a high degree of public disenchantment and distrust, because of the unprecedented mismatch between citizens' multiple aspirations and expectations and what they perceive – or occasionally misperceive – as what politicians have delivered. The EU itself is a prime example of a victim of such public misunderstanding: it is widely criticized for what are seen as its failings (even when the problems laid at its door are often the consequence of unrelated factors at the international, national, or regional level), but it receives little credit for its successes.

An obvious question arises as to how that gulf may be bridged. And like all successful bridges, the span needs to be firmly anchored on each side.

Thus politicians need to find more effective ways of reaching out to and connecting with voters. But equally, as democracy matures in terms of its relationship with the age of the Internet, its ability to exert real influence will depend on it finding ways of building more coherent coalitions from the chaotic cacophony of desires currently relayed by the social media. In an ever more interconnected world of 24/7 debate, politicians will become more responsive, but their response can be more effective when society achieves a clearer understanding itself of what it identifies as the priorities that enjoy real and broad consensus.

Angela Merkel's conclusion that "we Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands" is true in many more ways than she perhaps intended to indicate in her pre-election rally. If "we Europeans" is to mean anything, it must embrace not only the political class but the citizens too. Without some common ground between the governments and the governed, the fate of Europe and its institutions faces a tough future, at member state and at EU level.

In a society in which there is such a state of flux, and where traditional structures of family, community, or secure employment are increasingly under challenge, a sense of public alienation provokes also a public hunger for reassurance. This predicament, distressing in itself, represents nonetheless an opportunity for far-sighted politicians. A Europe seeking to discover and secure its own fate is going to have a need for European institutions that can regain the confidence of European citizens. And the European Parliament, as the direct representative of the citizens, is *primus inter pares* to take a leading role in this new engagement.

Successful responsiveness, the sort of political engagement that offers the best chance of rebuilding trust, will have to maintain a tight focus on the issues that can command broad attention and broad support. And the issues that continue to bind all Europeans together, whatever their political persuasion or whatever depth of political apathy they have resigned themselves to, are practical issues relating to their quality of life.

Indeed, the Parliament has recently recognized that it can have a powerful role in creating a more social Europe, providing better protection against unemployment and intervening more on health issues. These concerns may not have the strategic dimension of debates on foreign affairs or the human interest of minority rights in distant countries, but for the average person, for the vast majority of Europe's citizens, the real issues are paying the rent, putting food on the table, getting the kids through school, and having access to decent health and social services.

Thus, getting a firm grasp on some of these bread-and-butter issues, and demonstrating that the European Parliament not only cares about them but can influence the conditions for families' lives in Europe, could provide a firm base for a new type of relationship. The Parliament could acquire a new relevance for the citizens it represents – and lead the way for the other EU institutions too.

In some recent health-related areas, the performance of the institutions has been suboptimal: the data protection regulation might have taken more account of the specific nature of health research; the clinical trials regulation might have better understood the needs of citizens, and their readiness to participate in clinical trials; and cross-border care could be implemented more energetically if there were greater alignment across institutions and member states. Again, the Parliament could lead the way by demonstrating how effectively it can drive useful change by closer links between political groups at the national and regional levels, and among its own committees, so that healthcare rules are adopted and transposed so as to provide the full benefit that citizens could enjoy.

Channelling frustrated citizens' aspirations into productive policies that feed back into public well-being could mark a turning of the tide of public disenchantment. There are lessons to be learnt by all. But there are opportunities for change and growth of the Parliament – and of a citizens' EU in which the Parliament plays an even more central role.