

# It's raining... damn Brussels!

Pablo Cristóbal Jiménez Lobeira

Thursday, 15 September 2011

---

These days it is not uncommon to find in some of the media apocalyptic literature about the European Union (EU), which, while it already had some problems, is accumulating new ones.

Politically, it already faced a perceived democratic deficit and an overall messy arrangement as something that nobody knows exactly what it is: failed federation, close confederation, international organisation, common market, community of values, family of nations, or Cold War leftover.

Then came the Greek Euro crisis, with the blame mainly falling on "those profligate Greeks" (partially indebted importing German products), and the unfortunate spread of troubles to other countries which identified with an unflattering acronym ("PIGS" for Portugal, Ireland, Greece, Spain) but to which others must now be added, significantly Italy and even France.

Finally, a deteriorating social situation, with extremist parties holding the balance of power in countries with a tradition of openness and civility such as the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden or Denmark. The killing of Labour party youths in Norway and the recent riots in Britain help even less. In addition are the recent controversies between secularism, and Christianity (crucifixes in public schools in Italy) or Islam (bans on the wearing of Islamic veils in Belgium, France and other countries). Not to speak of the growing hostility towards immigrants from North Africa or even other EU countries (e.g. Romania).

But, is the European integration project-today the EU-to be blamed for them? Italians have a witty expression: "Piove? Governo ladro!," which transfers the blame for unwanted rain to the government. These days some find it easy to blame all of Europe's disgraces on "Brussels" where the EU has its headquarters. I dare say that is a bit short-sighted. Here are a few reasons.

The EU is a polity which does not fit into normal regime categories. It is not like the United States, or the UK; perhaps it distantly resembles Switzerland. Because it does not have a powerful central government ("Brussels") it needs consensus. It reacts slowly. It requires people from different countries, speaking different languages, having different perspectives of life, to come together and agree on joint paths to follow. It is not a faulty federation: it is just not a federation! It is a "mixed-commonwealth" if you like. It has to keep precious national diversity alive, and find common ground for 27 (soon 28) European states to agree on issues important for all.

Imagine if we had to do that with New Zealand, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Singapore, Malaysia and 20 other close neighbours. The EU is not a democracy

but it is made of democracies, and is becoming more democratic (take the European Parliament). Power is distributed among the European Council (gathering government leaders), the European Commission (executive branch, civil service) and the European Parliament, each with a "president", plus a new position (avowedly, with a rather long name) to coordinate foreign and security policy. The European Court of Justice (of the EU, plus the European Court of Human Rights, of the Council of Europe, another organisation with 47 member states) can barely cope with the amount of work it has.

Economically the Euro zone is, clearly, facing fiscal coordination problems, even if there is a European Central Bank. New ways of flexible economic cooperation will have to be found to manage the common currency, to avoid crises in the future, and to increase productivity and growth in the EU. Still, the bloc has a population close to 500 million and taken together is the largest economy in the world. The EU has been a great economic success operated by political parties with contrasting ideologies (e.g. Social and Christian Democrats) across the continent. Europeans are today much better off than ever their parents and grandparents were.

And the social problems arise from the amazing inflow of immigrants to a region that even in the twentieth century had exported people to the Americas, Australasia and other parts of the world. Today people go to Europe attracted by a project unique of its kind in history, which by and large offers an atmosphere of peace, prosperity, respect, tolerance, cooperation, and high levels of education, welfare, culture and environmental benefits. Yes, the changing social atmosphere demands reciprocal accommodation, and the fostering not only of a "neutral" but an inclusive and plural public sphere where the different world views have a voice. A multicultural Europe has to become inter-cultural as well.

"Brussels" may also be a very handy word for national governments, when they have to take costly decisions or face difficult situations. But in fact Brussels did not cause the English riots, neither did it make public finances in Italy chaotic. A good exercise is, from time to time, to think about how things would be without European integration. Imagine the clout tiny countries like Luxembourg or Slovenia could have in an increasingly challenging global atmosphere. Recently even "great powers" like France and Britain, have put aside centuries of mutual dislike and distrust to increase military cooperation (if only Napoleon and Nelson could see their countries sharing aircraft carriers!).

It is all right to be critical of the EU, a very imperfect polity, with huge economic and social challenges ahead. (By the way, often the sharpest criticisms are done with research happily funded by the EU!) But it would be neither fair nor truthful to present to those perhaps less familiar with the EU and the 60 year old project of European integration, a picture which is only partial. The highly successful project of European integration, the EU, faces today (like it did 10, 20, 30 years ago) big challenges. Yet Brussels is, often, a very useful tool to face them is.

Brussels is, admittedly, a rainy place. But it should not bear the blame for all of the rain in Europe.