



FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
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FEPS invited the three of us (Isabelle, Johan and Laia) to its 'Call to Europe' conference which took place in Brussels on 29th and 30th June 2011. It was our role to represent FEPS' Young Academic Network (YAN), but also to act as rapporteurs together with a senior member of FEPS' Scientific Council at the end of each session. FEPS sent us a very useful information sheet explaining our role and duties as rapporteurs, but it turned out that nothing can prepare you for the real experience.

The conference was set up in a format different to the one we usually see in the academic or think tank world. At the beginning of each of the three sessions, there was a key note speech followed by numerous short speeches. The speakers sat at tables in all four corners of the room and the audience sat in the middle. All rapporteurs sat around small round tables amongst the audience; the whole set-up reminded us of a coffee-shop. The venue definitely contributed to the feeling. The conference was set in the beautiful art-nouveau Bibliothèque Solvay, which could easily be mistaken for a Viennese *Kaffeehaus*.

In our function as rapporteurs, we were supposed to highlight the key themes invoked during the sessions. However, a plain summary of what was said would have bored the audience to death. Therefore, FEPS asked us to be critical, and if possible, even provocative. This turned out to be both fun and challenging. It meant that we would have to listen to each speech very carefully (and there were more than 12 per session) whilst finding the common themes and being critical. Moreover, each of us shared the rapporteurship with a FEPS Scientific Council member who we had never met before. As it turned out, they were really nice and interesting people. However, they seemed to have slightly different views on the rapporteurship.

In the following three paragraphs we will each give a short summary of our individual impressions and experiences from the Call to Europe conference. In the concluding remarks, both common views and different experiences will be discussed.

Session I: International Europe (Laia)

The conference started with a first session focusing on the role of the European Union in the international arena. The debate was introduced by Prof. Vivien Schmidt who identified three major problems in the EU's international profile: a lack of ambition, a lack of leadership, and a disconnection between leaders and citizens. According to Schmidt, these factors have contributed to the discourse of the « decline of EU ». In a globalized world where the US and China and other emerging powers such as Brazil or India are shaping the

international arena, the EU should not weaken its own role as a key player. A solution to the problem can only be found within the EU. Its politics and policies need to become more coherent for the EU to become a leading power at the global level.

During this session many problems and concerns were raised, such as : the impact of the financial crisis on the external action of the EU ; the role in the international institutions (in particular the reform of the UN was discussed) ; the internal institutional paralysis and how to make best use of the instruments that are available; the lack of leadership ; the emergence of the « politics of fear »... Many speakers agreed that these problems exist. The lack of leadership, legitimacy, strategic vision, coherence and consistency within the internal and the external politics, are symptoms, causes and consequences at the same time and should be tackled with a comprehensive approach, it was argued. In this context, the values that Social Democracy can provide, which are in the DNA of the European project, should be at the core of the reconstruction of the external profile of the European Union, it was stressed.

The EU still reacts with a small state mentality : it forgets that the Union is one of the major commercial actors in the world. Moreover, the EU not only plays an important role in the economic sphere, but also in the international debate on environmental law, human rights or disarmament regimes. The EU has used soft power to build its own international profile. Today, however, this strategy needs to be consolidated by a political corpus that vertebrates the Union as an international actor but also as a coherent and consistent union of states. It means that the EU needs a common vision, strong leadership and a coordinated strategy towards the Union itself, its neighbourhood and the world. In order to play a stronger role in the world, the EU needs political engagement nourished by new progressive ideas, but also the support of its citizens in order to strengthen the connection between high and low politics.

Session II: Next Social and Economic Europe (Johan)

The second session of the conference aimed to highlight current challenges for the European economic and social model and to point out new avenues for social-democratic parties. The tone of the debate was set firmly by the keynote speech made by Prof. Mark Blyth who painted the picture of a probable exacerbation and spreading of the financial crisis in the eurozone. He made three points. First, the crisis is not over; second, it was not exogenously produced, but rather endogenous to the financial system; and third, that this situation, however unfortunate, has opened up a political opportunity for the Left. As the debate was taking place while the Greek debt crisis was unfolding most speakers followed the keynote in putting their focus on the financial crisis and more broadly on macro-economic policy, and most agreed that these events manifested a political opportunity if correctly responded to by social-democratic parties.

That opportunity lays in what at first bears the resemblance of a gigantic problem for the Left. The crisis has increased debt levels in most countries and has ushered in a wave of austerity programmes. The political alternative from the 1990s and onwards has consisted of building an inclusive growth model where social investments play an important role. That option seems to be derailed by current developments. However, the same developments could open the way to further EU integration in the area of macroeconomic policy. Many of the speakers highlighted that an inclusive growth model can only work over the long-term and that governance over the financing of the requisite social investments therefore should be institutionalised at the European level. In a sense, this would represent a response to the success of the political right during the last couple of decades in institutionalising their policy goals, e.g. competition policy, at that level.

Given the focus on the financial crisis and macroeconomic policy, issues that dealt more with considerations of social inequalities were mostly missing. I would have been interested, for example, to hear more about if the speakers thought that the rise in precarious employment and the cutbacks in welfare that was underway long before the financial crisis constitutes a fundamental problem for the social investment strategy as it has taken form on the national and the EU level. Has the drive towards quantity, exemplified for example by the increase in labour market participation and the provision of child care, brought with it lower quality of work and services.

Another reflection from the conference is that there is a need, in my opinion, to find a format that allows the discussions to move down the ladder of abstraction to address specific policy reforms that seek to solve the problems at hand while strengthening the political agenda and normative aims of the political left. I think of this as a crucial next step and would recommend that working groups were set up that are much narrower in their focus, allowing for detailed discussions. The opportunities mentioned above can only be realised if convincing new policy ideas are put forward.

I enjoyed very much to act as a rapporteur during the conference and I very much appreciate the confidence entrusted in me. I also very much liked the innovative format. Having short presentations was very successful in delivering presentations that were succinct and to the point. I hope, and believe, that the Next Left project and other initiatives have created an important platform from which we now can move forward.

Session III: Political Europe (Isabelle)

The final session dealt with 'Political Europe', which is (again!) a very broad topic. The speakers came from all sorts of different backgrounds, including academics (such as Professor Jean-Michel de Waele, ULB Brussels) and politicians (MEPs, MPs, and the Secretary General of the PES, Philip Cordery). Some of the speeches were thought-provoking and inspiring, such as the short but sharp comments made by Sir Julian Priestley,

a former Secretary General of the European Parliament. However, in my opinion there were too many speeches and I felt slightly overwhelmed by the load of information and opinions. Sometimes less is more.

The common theme of the speeches and the comments made by members of the audience was the question of how to achieve a more politicised EU. Not surprisingly, everybody seemed to agree that more politicisation – that is: EU-level politics along the left/right axis – would help to catch the attention of the media and the citizens. But: How to politicise the EU? Easy recipes for success were not available, and the conference was divided on this question. One group of people believed that the EU treaties offered enough room for politicisation. For instance, it was argued that the role of the European Parliament was strengthened through the Lisbon Treaty and that it was now in a strong position to approve or refute the European Commission on a basis of its left/right majority. Others argued that the treaties needed to be changed. The role played by the European-level parties (such as the PES or EPP) in politicising politics received much attention. The inability of the Left to select a common candidate for the European Commission Presidency during the 2009 European elections was heavily criticised.

I personally enjoyed the conference and the rapporteur experience very much. It was an honour and a pleasure to represent YAN at the conference. I felt a bit nervous; after all, summarising a three hour debate in a few sentences is never easy, and being funny and provocative in front of so many people and after a long day isn't a piece of cake either. I was neither funny nor provocative, so there is plenty of room for improvement. Overall, though, I think that Johan, Laia and I did our jobs as rapporteurs. We remained short and clear in our remarks. Some of our senior co-rapporteurs, however, went on talking too much and drifted off. The audience clearly lost their focus, and nobody can blame them after so many speeches. A rapporteur has to be short and sharp. But: nevermind. It is a learning experience. I would like to encourage FEPS to invite YAN members to more conferences. It gives YAN the opportunity to raise its profile and get to know FEPS better.

Conclusion

The discussions were all very interesting and held at a crucial moment in time when the EU is experiencing a deep crisis. Despite this, there was a general sense of urgency, of wanting to use the opportunity that the crisis has produced to advance the agenda of the Left. We believe that the best way of doing that is to take the new ideas that have come out of the discussions as an inspiration for FEPS for setting up a number of smaller working groups to deal with these issues in detail and to act as a real resource for the Left in seeking to build a fairer and more successful post-crisis Europe.

We would like to thank the organisers for entrusting us with the opportunity to act as rapporteurs during the conference. It was a very inspirational event to have been a part of

both in relation to the content of the discussions, and in relation to its new and innovative format. We believe it to have been very successful.