

Meanwhile: On leaving Europe
Jeremy Kinsman International Herald Tribune

Published: July 26, 2006

BRUSSELS As Canadian ambassador to Europeans for the last 14 years, I have urged Europeans and North Americans to celebrate that the wars of "that wonderful, murderous continent" (Amos Oz) are over - Europe has never been so peaceful, prosperous, healthy or green.

Enlargement of the EU may have unsettled some, but it demonstrated the appeal and influence of the Union across the Continent, and the allure of its standards of democracy.

Within the European Union, national identities are robust. A favorite Canadian theme - sustaining cultural diversity in an age of standardization - has become bedrock faith in Europe's capitals. Some political knaves deploy national feeling to undermine the notion of a European identity, but Europeans, like Canadians, are becoming used to positive multiple identities.

All in all, by most standards of well-being, humans have seldom had it so good as Europeans today.

And yet, what American writer James Salter felt in the 1950s at La Coupole is still around - "the old disease, difficult to cure, discontent." Dominique Moïsi has written of Europe's "multiple fears."

There is a fear of change and there is a push back against politicians and elites from a morose public in semi-denial. In 2006, the 150th anniversary of the birth of Sigmund Freud, Europeans seem conflicted, in the condition Di Lampedusa described in "The Leopard": "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." Freud would no doubt counsel the patient to face reality.

The main background reality is a demographic crisis that threatens the sustainability of public pensions. Immigration might be a partial solution, but immigrants are one of Europe's phobias, compounded by the shocking discovery of home-grown jihadism among ill-integrated young men.

Europe must get past these demography- immigration issues, which are attitudinal, and confront the more daunting reality of the need for economic reform, which requires deep adjustment.

How hard is reform and what has to change? Politicians need to improve their approach to the principal challenge - the high cost and low mobility of European labor.

The economic context is mostly positive. In the continental economies, growth has been sluggish and unemployment intractably high, but Europe's bugbear, inflation, is under control and the euro works. Europeans have almost unique advantages of education and infrastructure, which ought to support change.

Yet, as Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker of Luxembourg once said, "We all know what we need to do, but we don't know how to win elections after we have done it."

Playing to bad moods from a position of almost universal unpopularity, leaders and aspirants, particularly on the center-right, have too often pandered to the fears stoked by the abundance of identity-based right-wing populist parties. They promise they will protect the public - from change, from Brussels, from reality. They should be insisting instead that if there is not change in labor practices, Europe's social model and their constituents' prosperity will not survive.

I see new hope in the generation of attractive leaders now emerging. Angela Merkel is raising the candor bar in Germany and both Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal are lifting the debate in France.

Europe's solutions also lie in the fact that politics and choices are local. One EU size does not fit all.

The balance between a Union "center" that establishes norms and expectations in a single market, and member states where people see themselves best reflected is a healthy one, provided that politicians don't play the blame game against the center.

For North Americans, it is vital that the EU succeeds. Since coming to Europe in the early 1990s, I have seen the greatest wave of intercontinental investment in history turn the Atlantic economy into our shared economic home base in the world.

Politically, Iraq has made trans-Atlantic discourse rough, but the United States and Europe are now more committed to working together in the world. Europeans are acquiring self-belief in foreign policy, as Javier Solana shows added value to efforts to lessen the world's dangers.

Afghanistan is tough but we are there together. Trans-Atlantic cooperation in counter-terrorism has no precedent. There is an effort to work with Africa. Washington can see clearly from its own bubble that it needs Europe as a partner in the world.

The American image has suffered, primarily because of the handling of the invasion of Iraq, revelations of human rights short-cuts, and a sense that the United States had dismissed Europe and even the need for international cooperation itself. But I discern the damage as recoverable. Clearly, Europeans still esteem and even envy much of America's narrative, especially its creativity, education and energy.

Self-confidence is a prerequisite for accepting change. Many saw in the World Cup fiesta a return of European self-assurance. I leave Europe hopeful that renewal is coming. If so, the

things we have most loved and admired about Europe can indeed stay as they are.

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