

The man who could blow up the EU

On 22nd April 1966, Jean Rey, the Belgian lawyer who succeeded Walter Hallstein as president of the European Commission, delivered a speech in Brussels full of optimism about the future of the European project. At this time, the Community had just emerged from the “Empty Chair Crisis” where France’s General de Gaulle, concerned about the increasing power of the Commission and erosion of national sovereignty, recalled France’s representatives, resulting in six months of virtual paralysis within the European institutions.

Rey expressed great confidence about the Community’s ability to bounce back from the crisis and move forward towards closer integration:- “There is no reason for the leaders of the Community to show the any hint of pessimism, of discouragement; the slightest doubt about the eventual success of their efforts.” Europe had a great future, he claimed, but only if it integrated. Indeed, in so doing, Europe could lead the world:- “The times when nations could live in isolation is over...After several centuries when the nation state represented the final word in political wisdom, see how the world is organising itself in continents and it’s the Europeans who are leading by their example.”

Overt federalists like Rey are a rare breed nowadays. True, the EU has expanded from its original six members to 28 (soon to be 27) but the optimistic, almost visionary quality of Rey’s utterances are a thing of the past. No better proof of can be found by comparing Rey’s words with a speech by Martin Schulz, the leader of the German Socialist Party, the SPD, at his party’s conference on 7th December. The substance may be similar but the tone is completely different.

“I want there to be constitutional treaty to create a federal

Europe” he said. Fine, that has always been the goal of the EU. He then went on to say that once drafted, it would “be presented to the member states, and those who are against it will simply leave the EU.”

This is the big difference. It would never have occurred to Jean Rey to talk of expulsion from the EU and Schulz’s harsh language is an implicit admission that the European Project is faltering. We addressed some of the reasons a couple of months ago and in spite of the promising headline data on the Eurozone economy, the political divisions are as deep as ever.

Far from encouraging unity around common ideals, Schulz’s words will only inflame these divisions. His vision of “Europe” is the Western European multicultural variant which is being so fiercely resisted in countries like Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. Furthermore, as a German, his words will be interpreted in Southern Europe as a threat to their fiscal independence. The most extreme reaction may well come from his own countrymen, however. The federal Europe to which he aspires can only come about if his countrymen are prepared to foot the bill and subsidise the poorer countries. The lack of enthusiasm for such generosity lay behind the success of *Alternative für Deutschland* in the recent Federal Election. Perhaps Herr Schulz might care to reflect that his own party recently registered its worst performance – and under his leadership – in almost seventy years.

True, there was a certain amount of grandstanding in the speech. The SPD is setting out its stall for renewing its coalition with Mrs Merkel’s CDU party but its overt federalism was given short shrift by the German Chancellor, who said ““I believe the ability to act now is the priority, not setting long-term goals,” In reality, while Schulz (and Jean-Claude Juncker, for that matter) are wanting to put their foot on the accelerator, Merkel actually wants to go more slowly but in exactly the same direction – and it’s not a direction that commands as great a degree of support as it once did. There

may not be anyone of the calibre of Charles de Gaulle in a position of authority in an EU member state, but the issues are the same as those which provoked the “empty chair crisis” – increasing centralisation and a loss of sovereignty by the member states.

In a very thought-provoking article, Ambrose Evans-Pritchard said that we must not forget why we are leaving the EU. “It is not a whimsical choice. The decision was forced upon us because the EU began to assert ‘totalitarian’ reach, using Hannah Arendt’s term advisedly to mean a systematic assault on prior traditions and institutions in order to create an entirely new order,” he said. The article begins, however, by quoting someone from the very heart of Europe who is claiming that the EU is becoming an “imperial construction”. In other words, it’s not just the UK which has lots of unhappy people. “Life in Europe in 2017 is resembling more and more what it was like under colonial administration. We are subjected to an invisible administration that shapes our destiny down to the tiniest details. Should we really be surprised that it is leading to revolts?” asks the Belgian David van Reybrouck, a prolific writer and historian.

The EU expended a huge amount of energy (and, no doubt, money) to try to contain Brexit and prevent a domino effect. It breathed a huge sigh of relief when Neither Geert wilders nor Marine le Pen achieved the breakthrough they had hoped for. The volatility of many European voters and the fault lines between the EU-27 have not gone away, however, and if Schulz becomes Germany’s vice-chancellor and fancies joining forces with Jean-Claude Juncker and Emmanuel Macron to push ahead with the federal Europe to which they fervently aspire, the net result may well be the opposite – that they end up blowing the whole project to pieces.

