

North v South, East v West

Cast your eyes no further east than Berlin, Vienna or Rome and all looks pretty rosy in the EU's garden. Apart from the shock of Brexit, most of the critical votes during the past year have gone the Establishment's way. Even before our referendum, the Austrians set the scene by choosing a former Green party leader as President rather than Norbert Hofer of strongly eurosceptic FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria). Now this year, the Dutch and French elections have not seen any breakthrough for eurosceptic parties and looking to the future, Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is losing support, with Angela Merkel looking unassailable while Italy's Five Star Movement does not now look likely to make any sort of breakthrough when the country goes to the polls. It too may have peaked.

Meanwhile, the economic news looks positive. The Eurozone is enjoying a decent recovery with deflation beaten and business confidence returning. After almost a decade of one problem after another, the EU does appear on the surface to have turned a corner. Frexit, Iexit and other variations on the same theme don't take up many column inches now.

In actual fact, one other country would vote to leave the EU if granted a referendum – the Czech Republic. At the beginning of July, the *Spectator* Magazine published an interesting report on the state EU in collaboration with Project 28, a polling organisation. 47% of Czechs would vote to leave as opposed to 43% who want to stay. The country is very much an outlier, however, as the next most anti-EU country, Greece, would vote to stay in by 54% to 39%.

Scratch beneath the surface, however, and the picture isn't so positive. Some 41% of Italians, 32% of French and 28% of Germans do not think that the EU in its present form will still exist in 10 years' time. What is behind this sentiment?

– or to put it another way, what are the most likely causes of conflict within the EU, causing it to splinter?

Firstly, the €urozone's overall improved economic performance conceals real problems within individual countries. Youth unemployment is still over 40% in Spain and 45% in Greece. Italy recently bailed out two of its banks and, along with Spain, the overall indebtedness of its country's banks increases while the net credit of German banks is also increasing. Such imbalances within the Single Currency area have the potential to cause problems if uncorrected. Furthermore, any push for closer political and economic integration within the €urozone would risk reopening old wounds when they have not had long to heal. Club Med is still resentful of Germany, whereas German taxpayers will not want to subsidise what they regard as the profligate and lazy southern countries.

More destabilising than the north-south divisions, however, are the east-west tensions. The *Spectator* claims that Hungarians have little appetite for "Hexit", with only 15% of voters wanting to leave the EU. Viktor Orbán, the country's leader, is a frequent critic of Brussels, however, He is no enthusiast of further integration and according to a piece in the Guardian, "he doesn't want to leave the EU; he wants to subvert it, which is far more dangerous."

The refugee crisis has inflamed East-West tensions. Hungary's initial opposition to accepting large numbers of immigrants was worded roughly along the lines of "we're not ready to accept immigrants; our country is still rebuilding itself after years of subjection to the Soviet Union. Come back in 20 years' time and maybe we'll be able to handle the sort of multicultural society you have in the West." Now the rhetoric has hardened. Orbán doesn't want multiculturalism now or ever and has announced that his country will offer a home for "Germans, Dutch, French and Italians, terrified politicians and journalists who here in Hungary want to find the Europe

they have lost in their homelands.” In the same speech, he also attacked political correctness while elsewhere, he claimed that Europe’s Christian identity was under threat from Moslem migration.

It is quite clear that there is a vast difference between his vision of the EU’s future and that of Macron and Merkel. “In 1990, Europe was our future, now we are Europe’s future,” he said on another occasion. Meanwhile, according to one blog, in the Czech Republic, the country’s parliament has voted to enshrine in its Constitution (subject to Senate approval) the right for its citizens to carry arms. The reason for this seemingly drastic measure seems to be a concern about the possible problems which migrants might cause. The blogger wasn’t able to provide too many sources of information and any extra detail about this surprising development would be welcomed.

Such attitudes are light years away from the pathetic defeatism of Sweden’s former Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, who said that his countrymen were “boring”, going on to rubbish his own country to an incredible degree, claiming that “only barbarism is genuinely Swedish.” Well, the Swedish Vikings were a pretty rough lot a thousand years ago, but since then, European civilisation, including Sweden, has much of which to be proud. Is he unaware of the heroic efforts of Sweden’s king Gustav II Adolf who played a huge part in saving Europe from barbarism in the Thirty Years’ War? Or the great Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus whose categorisation of plants into different genres is still the basis of botany today?

It is quite unbelievable for any western leader to be so dismissive of his country, but although perhaps the worst, he is far from unique. Douglas Murray’s book *The Strange Death of Europe* claims that the entire continent is “weighed down with a guilt for its past.” While his arguments are persuasive, they hardly apply to the former Soviet bloc countries like Hungary and Poland who are proudly patriotic and defensive of

their culture after years of subjection to the sterile ideology of Marxism-Leninism. There doesn't seem to be much evidence of guilt in the utterances of Mr Orbán nor indeed, in those of Poland's most influential politician Jarosław Kaczyński.

Furthermore, we are not talking about a straight west-east split. I am sure that many people living in Western Europe probably sympathise far more with Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic than with their own guilt-ridden political leaders. It is these leaders, however, who will be trying to drive European integration forward and if it is on their multicultural, self-loathing politically-correct terms, then Hexit, Czexit, Polexit may be on our lips sooner than you can say Jack Robinson.