

September 29, 2007 Saturday

Reinforcement of rationale behind the European Union

From Mr Brendan Donnelly.

Sir, I am puzzled by the assumption that has recently surfaced in your columns that the possible dissolution of Belgium might be an embarrassment or a reverse for the European Union.

On the contrary. "Put not your trust in nation states" is the founding philosophy of the EU.

The disappearance of Belgium, the UK or Spain might (or might not) cause problems for Belgians, Britons or Spaniards. It would reinforce rather than undermine the political and intellectual rationale of the EU.

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And here is the previous correspondence on the subject:

September 19, 2007 Wednesday

Lessons for Europe if fragile Belgium goes down

Talk about idealists being mugged by reality. If fragile Belgium does, as some are predicting, finally collapse into its Flemish and Walloon constituent parts it will amount to the biggest embarrassment for believers in a deeply integrated European Union since the Treaty of Rome first called for an "ever closer union" half a century ago.

The current crisis in the EU's host nation has been long in the making. It was brought to a head by the failure of parties divided on ethno-linguistic lines - Dutch speakers in the north and French speakers in the south - to form a government after elections three months ago. The French-speaking Walloons still show little appetite for separation. In the Flemish north, by contrast, support for independence has widened dramatically from its base inside the far-right Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) party and is edging towards the 50 per cent mark. If an external or internal shock shifted the terms of debate any further in the separatists' direction, the kingdom of Belgium could be history.

If Belgium does go down it will provide only the latest and starkest reminder of the endurance of ethnic nationalism in modern Europe and the corresponding failure of elitist supra-nationalists to forge larger identities holding any real meaning for ordinary people. Despite obvious differences in the historical contexts, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia - the last case much talked about these days in Belgium - all collapsed for that same underlying reason.

The first lesson for the EU should be obvious: fail to show respect for core national identities at your peril. If Belgium is having problems holding two national groups together in a single state, crass attempts by deep integrationists to bind closely together the fate of 27 may end in tears. The greatest long-term danger to the EU may not, therefore, come from the proverbial British eurosceptic banging on about the threat posed by Brussels to the great British sausage. It may come from among its most passionate supporters.

Those of us who believe in the vital importance of a functioning EU to the continent's stability and prosperity but who take a pragmatic and national-democratic rather than an elitist and supra-national approach need to wrest control of the agenda once and for all.

The second lesson is that the consequences of anti-reformist economic and social agendas may extend further than had hitherto been assumed. A driving force for separatist sentiment in Belgium's

Flemish north has been frustrated at having to subsidise a socialist-orientated Walloon south with its attendant problems of mass unemployment and welfare dependency. Differences in the ability of national groups to confront economic problems with equal seriousness can put great strains on a supra-national state entity, as was also clearly demonstrated in the divergent economic and social priorities of the Czechs and the Slovaks in the run up to the collapse of Czechoslovakia in 1993. In a too deeply integrated EU, countries that have taken their reformist responsibilities seriously - especially looking a decade or two hence when demographic decline and reductions in the working age population begin to bite - may start to ask serious questions about the value of an EU in which they have to bail out the laggards. The EU must recognise that the economic reform question is not merely about relative growth rates in a globalised world. It touches on the future of the EU itself.

That said, if the cause of the deep integrationist, "social Europe" types is taking a battering from all this, it does not mean that narrow-minded, anti-EU nationalists can start popping the Champagne corks. On the contrary, the demise of Belgium would be a huge boon to separatists across Europe, not least in Scotland and Wales. British eurosceptics should be careful what they wish for.

Finally, it is only one vision for the EU that suffers serious damage here. Democratic pragmatists, who support European integration as a means to enhancing national interests rather than as an end in itself, can plausibly argue that their vision of the EU has never been more relevant. If the Flemish and Walloons do unhook from each other, they can quickly hook back into the EU as separate entities bound by common European values. The very existence of the EU allows us to contemplate a resurgence in national sentiment without fear of violence or confrontation. In the context of Europe's past, that is no small achievement.

The author is senior fellow for Europe at Chatham House, the London think-tank

September 20, 2007 Thursday

Break-up of Belgium could not be blamed on the EU

From Prof Richard G. Whitman.

Sir, Robin Shepherd ("Lessons for Europe if fragile Belgium goes down", September 19) asserts that the cause of the current political impasse in Belgium should be laid at the door of the European Union. This is a misreading of the dynamics of

Belgian politics and the influence of the EU on developments within the country.

Belgium's current political difficulties are not caused by Brussels (in the form of the EU's institutions) intervening in Belgian political life. The EU and the other 26 member states have remained firmly outside the machinations of coalition negotiations among Belgium's politicians.

The Belgian public, over successive elections, have been increasingly exercising their vote for parties seeking support within - rather than across - the language divide in Belgium. If the Belgium nation-state were to divide it would be the outcome of decisions made by its politicians to seek the devolution of political power and the electorate endorsing these measures.

Consequently, such a decision would neither be an embarrassment for the EU nor represent a profound crisis for European integration, as Mr Shepherd asserts. Rather, the EU would be available to provide an economic, monetary and political framework within which any soft divorce could take place.

Brussels muscle cannot be used to preserve Belgian moules frites and beer but it can ensure that its Flemish and Walloon successors could be safely consumed (and paid for) without disruption or interruption.

Richard G. Whitman,
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September 21, 2007 Friday

A more nuanced view on Flemings and Walloons

From Mr Robin Shepherd.

Sir, I was shocked by Richard G. Whitman's letter ("Break-up of Belgium could not be blamed on the EU", September 20) in response to my Comment article the previous day ("Lessons for Europe if fragile Belgium goes down").

Prof Whitman accuses me of arguing that "the current political impasse in Belgium should be laid at the door of the European Union". No, I don't. I say the opposite. I argue that the crisis was brought to a head because of ethno-linguistic divisions in Belgium as well as social and economic factors. Read the article. What I do say is that the current crisis in Belgium illustrates something important about the difficulties of forging supranational identities and that there are useful lessons here about the future of an EU which, in a looser, less deeply integrated incarnation, I wholeheartedly support. Perhaps supra-nationalist integrationists find it easier to avoid serious discussion by misrepresenting their opponents' positions. I leave it to others to judge why that might be.

Robin Shepherd,
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September 21, 2007 Friday

A Belgian break-up would not necessarily be a bad thing

From Mr Christian Feustel.

Sir, Whereas I agree with Robin Shepherd on the vital importance of economic reform for Europe, I disagree with his other arguments. Many people in our continent increasingly understand that the old nation-state, as created often many centuries ago, is both too small and too big. It is too small because it cannot effectively tackle the real problems that will have an impact on us in the future (climate change, migration, defence, security and so on). People understand that real action on a global level can only be undertaken by a more powerful actor such as the European Union. And it is also too big because the "cosiness factor" and true "we-feeling" that a community so badly needs can only be provided by (sub-) regional entities. The news from Belgium is not necessarily bad.

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September 21, 2007 Friday

All for the better if Europe's swollen nations split

From Dr Nick Coote.

Sir, Robin Shepherd's article on the Belgian plight ("Lessons for Europe if fragile Belgium goes down", September 19) is a good example of the mindset behind Europe's inability to get its act together and become an efficiently operating economic unit.

Who is dictating the rules to us about what constitutes the size of an "identity holding any real meaning for ordinary people" ? Never mind a pipsqueak-sized nation such as Belgium, it is painfully obvious that people cannot handle the size of big nations such as the UK, France and Germany. That is why we have Catalanian, Cornish, Breton and countless other regional separatist movements.

Would it really hurt us if we scrapped these giant countries and split them into manageable units with true regional identity and with which we feel comfortable?

I was born in London. I do not feel the need for the "England" and "Great Britain" baggage; "London, Europe" will suffice. (OK, I will make an exception for football and rugby enthusiasts: we can keep the nations for that, but that reason only.)

Belgium, our European equivalent of the Panamanian Canal Zone when it comes to history, should never have existed in the first place. Neither should have Yugoslavia, nor Iraq. Clearly, we need to install a bloody dictator in Belgium if we wish to hold it together.

If Belgium splits, so what? The people within the two new entities will remain European. The success of Europe is in its diversity of culture; the countries in which these cultures reside is becoming less and less relevant.

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September 25, 2007 Tuesday

Failings that left Belgium at the mercy of nationalists

From Mr Stefan Schepers.

Sir, Robin Shepherd ("Lessons for Europe if fragile Belgium goes down", September 19) rightly points to two lessons for the European Union. Perhaps there is a third one: a lesson on good government.

The Belgian federal constitution does not provide for the usual checks and balances in federal states: there is no hierarchy between federal and regional laws, no rational division of powers, no regional fiscal responsibility. On top of that, only regional political parties are left, as a result of an electoral system based on a sort of linguistic apartheid in Flanders and Wallonia. Only in the Brussels region can people still choose between Dutch- or French-speaking candidates, an exception that Flemish nationalists now wish to abolish.

The absence of federal parties allowed Flemish nationalists (there are francophone extremists too) to present every political issue through a regional prism and to use it to seek an increase of power. Like Serb nationalists, they followed a tactic of systematically criticising everything still shared with other regions (the monarchy, the social security system, etc) and denigrating them in order to justify their growing demands. The French-speaking minority is rightly worried, given that the same people have prevented Belgium adhering to the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Leading Flemish academics have repeatedly warned against the manipulation of opinion polls or against the simplification of politics to one issue.

Last year, then, the Flemish Christian Democrats made an electoral alliance with the nationalists, and now they are their prisoners (quite the reverse of the Austrian Christian Democrats, who linked up with Jorg Haider but stayed away from his rhetoric). They did so purely to regain power and further dismantle the federal state in favour of their regional power base. Many people voted for them only because they wanted another coalition government, not because they supported their regional nationalism.

Once the mechanisms of good public governance are deficient, the road is open for electoral adventures. In Belgium's case it was ill-thought-out decentralisation and linguistic nationalism, but in Europe's case it may be ill-considered centralisation.

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