

[Comment] Let's reduce the cost of Europe

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - Back in the 1980s, an important piece of research by Paolo Cecchini looked at the benefits that would be gained by creating the single market, dubbed the "cost of non-Europe". The French national audit office has published figures this week that reveal the opposite, the cost of Europe.

The French presidency held in the second half of 2008 is revealed to have cost 171 million euros, or nearly 1 million euros per day. Previous French presidencies had cost 56.9 million euros in 2000 and 14.1 million euros in 1995. The average cost of a presidency is said to be 70 or 80 million euros, so whether by historic or contemporary standards, France 2008 was expensive.



The French EU presidency was most expensive ever (Photo: the_amanda)

News reports on the subject have concentrated on some of the more alarming examples of presidency spending, such as a shower costing €276,000 that was never used, a dinner that cost €5,000 a head, and a €90,000 carpet. Critics of President Sarkozy have enjoyed blaming the huge costs on his own extravagance. It fits with the mental picture of him that everyone has: a continual and burning need to prove himself in the eyes of his peers, that takes him beyond normal notions of good taste.

That is a great story, but what is the reality?

French government officials have leaped to explain that all is not what it seems: the shower was really a complex of facilities; the dinner bill included refurbishing the entire venue; the carpet had to be enormous because so many delegations attended the summit. Perhaps the money was needed for the presidency after all.

But let me ask a different question: why spend money on presidencies at all?

A feature of life among the indigenous peoples of what is now the north west Pacific coast of the United States and Canada was the potlatch, a ceremony marked by the distribution or destruction of wealth. Individuals would compete with each other to demonstrate the most excessive generosity, conspicuous consumption before the term was coined. The practice was eventually banned because the costs spiralled out of control and caused so much disruption and poverty. (The reformist government of Afghanistan in the 1970s tried to limit the amount of money that was spent on weddings, for similar reasons.)

The EU presidency is a form of potlatch. How impressive a show can each country put on in turn? How delicious the menu at the official banquets? How generous and stylish the gifts for the journalists and summit guests? (I declare an interest, in the form of a very nice smoked salmon from an Irish presidency once.)

One of the goals of the pro-Europeans will be achieved when European decision-making becomes "normal", that is that it becomes a routine part of politics and not deserving of special celebrations or attention. Offer meals, by all means, as a normal part of hospitality, but do not feel the need to show off.

The good news arising from this story is that the presidency tradition may well be coming to an end. The ratification of the Lisbon treaty, which surely cannot be far away now, will see the creation of a new permanent president for the European Council in place of the rotating system we have now.

We will get a more rational and consistent approach to policy-making, with projects that are completed rather than just started, and priorities that run for more than 6 months at a time. In an increasingly complex world, isn't that how we want government to run?

Lisbon will give us a better system of decision-making and, whatever the cost of the president's office and private plane, probably a cheaper one, too.

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