

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN 21TH CENTURY EUROPE

A lecture by

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National Europe Centre Paper No. 9

Presented at the Australian National University, 10 May 2002, Mills Room

Europe is going through an exciting and difficult time. The problems it faces are indeed serious and complex, yet history indicates that the biggest leaps forward in European integration have occurred when faced with these challenges.

So what are these challenges? The first one, of course, is the process of European Union (EU) enlargement. The Europe of 15 members is in talks with 13 other countries that want to join the Union. This is probably one of the biggest diplomatic exercise in the history of diplomacy. It is undeniable that the new Europe, with its 25 or 27 members, will need some new rules of the game.

Another pending problem are the new realities for which there are still no common policies, such as the issue of immigration. The EU countries, working hard to get out of their respective crises, need ever growing numbers of immigrants in order to keep their rates of development. But European societies do not always receive the migratory waves in the same way. In the last 10 years, 15 million people have arrived to the EU coming from other parts of the world. Each country has its own policy on immigration, and that leads to significant imbalances. The European Commission tries to coordinate these, but it is a complicated task. This is made all the more so because the necessary arrival of new workers to the European market goes hand in hand with situations in which the newcomers are rejected. As has been well publicised, a significant number of voters fear the presence of immigrants and support some candidates who use that fear in their speeches or propose programs that are clearly anti-European. More on this later.

Foreign policy is another 'EU problem'. The EU lacks a united voice. It is evident in its dealing with the Middle East where its efforts are stifled among the protagonists - America, the Palestinian and the Israelis. Nevertheless, the enormous scale of the crisis and the contradictions of American policy have made it possible, in the last few weeks, for European diplomacy to put forward its own initiatives.

Clearly, then, there are problems facing the EU. But there are also significant opportunities. Twelve out of 15 member states began to put into practice on January 1st the transformation of their national currencies into one European currency. There is no Spanish peseta, there is no French franc, no Italian lira, no German mark. In those 12 countries, the legal currency is now the Euro. It is possible that the United Kingdom, Sweden and Denmark will also join the Euro.

Today, I'd like to talk about the opportunity facing Europe's media. More specifically, are they up to the task of connecting citizens and elites in this dynamic period of economic and political unification? There are some reasons not to be too optimistic. On the other hand, we have the Spanish example, which I shall now outline.

General Franco died in November 1975. El País, my newspaper, was born six months afterwards. That was the result of almost five years' effort. In 1975, the Spanish dictatorship was in its last stages. Spanish society had outgrown its 40-year suit: economic growth and the wish for freedom broke through the narrow limits imposed on the political and cultural life. On May 4 1976, El País was on the streets for the first time, but the press already played an important role in Spain. Several newspapers echoed on their pages the new democratic ideas and the changing society. The formula and the timing of El País -an independent newspaper fighting for democratic values within a society willing to start a new age- were rewarded with a fast growth.

El País was soon the leading Spanish newspaper. It remains in this position today. The broader point is that when the nation passed from a dictatorship to a democracy, as well as in the attempted 1981 coup d'etat, the Spanish press at large recognised their role to reconcile both sides of a country that had still to recover from its civil war. The media that favoured change led the bourgeoisie, the professionals, the cultural world, the clandestine parties and union workers. And it had to be done without breaking the agreement on changing without revolution. Those newspapers that did not break their bonds with the old regime had a very brief life. Those who risked all and committed themselves to democracy went on. It was thanks to that national pact between politicians, journalists and large parts of civil society that Spain has reached its position as having the fifth largest GDP in the EU. It hopes to join the G8 and now holds the Presidency of the Council of Ministers of the European Union for the third time.

Where is the European Union heading? EU enlargement will require a new set of rules. The EU has gone through successive enlargements - from 6 to 9, then 10, then 12 and now 15 - and every time has kept outgrowing the suit. What will it be like with 10 or 12 more? There must be modifications in the organization. They will have to limit the right of veto, the Presidency will have to be reorganized ensuring small countries are more effective and up to the task, and making sure that the big countries are not out of the presidency for too long. The problem is gaining public support. Some European citizens, even some leaders, are not so keen on the enlargement

process. They would prefer the pace to slow, or even for the Union to be scaled down.

World political conditions after September 11 are difficult for the EU. The most pressing issues have now to do with safety, defense and counterterrorism. The 15 member states do not have a clearly articulated common policy on these issues. There are different sensitivities and many European countries think Washington fails to give Europe its due.

The economic situation is also awkward. Europe's engine, Germany, has not come out of the crisis yet, and the growth rates of the big four are relatively poor compared with previous performance. Spain is growing at between 2 and 3%. Unemployment is high and the pacts on stability and growth make it impossible for the member states to exceed certain limits regarding the public deficit.

Socially, Europe suffers from a feeling of insecurity. According to the last Eurobarometer, 90% of Europeans consider the lack of safety their main worry. There is a tendency to identify unemployment, illegal immigration and crime with the European Union and its enlargement efforts. That is surely why nearly half the French, for instance, are against the enlargement of the EU. Eighteen percent of French voters gave their support in last Sunday's election to Jean-Marie Le Pen. There has also been a xenophobic and anti-European vote in the latest elections held in Italy, Denmark, Austria, perhaps in the Netherlands in a few days, although it is difficult to assess the impact of the assassination of Pim Fortuyn. These are disturbing views and states of mind which, together with the defense of national interests, put a lot of strain on the debate about the enlargement of the EU and on all the Community policies.

The big debates and decisions about Europe's future will be centered around moderate, conservative, right-wing or right-center governments. Left-wing parties have suffered greatly in the recent past. Less than four years ago, social democratic parties and coalitions were in control in 13 out of 15 governments in the European Union. Now, they keep the power only in 7. And we have still the elections in the Netherlands, this month, and Germany in September. The UK is the obvious exception to this trend. The main issue is the lack of imaginative projects capable of overcoming the cynicism and disappointment of voters.

I think the European left is in crisis. It has not yet digested the fall of the Berlin Wall which may be why it is divided in France, Italy and Spain. The left does not know whether to go back to old

values or join the anti-globalization protest. It is also confused on the issue of sovereignty and supra-nationality. Their power-base throughout the 1990s, when they governed over nearly all Europe, is now in crisis. Further, they haven't the tools to fight against the wave of conservatism. The right governs undisturbed in Spain and in France. There is an open contest in Germany, with elections in September between Chancellor Schroeder and the conservative leader, Stoiber. However there are some countries in which the alliance between the center-right and the nationalist right or extreme right parties may cause problems. This is the case in Italy, Portugal, Denmark and Austria. There are new alliances forming which cut across national ideology. The pact between the prime ministers of Spain, Italy and Great Britain to promote a plan of economic liberalization and labour market flexibility has been disparaged by both side of politics in Germany and France.

What is needed from Europe's media is to address all these forementioned issues with courage and without prejudices. Some media have proven their ability to inform and create opinion while also echoing the most dynamic feelings present in society. We need the media to fill a vacuum. There is clearly a lack of debate, proposals and ideas. In the words of European Commissioner Chris Patten, "if the political debate is divorced from principle and ideas, it becomes simply a branch of consumer marketing, and then the extremisms and aggressively simple solutions will dominate the agenda. When democratic politicians have nothing to say, or ignore the issues that really concern the voters, then others will fill the airwaves". Patten is right, and his words partly explain the power of the anti-establishment vote in France and other countries. But I do not feel optimistic about the media being able to be up to the challenges before them.

Readership of newspapers, specially in southern Europe, is relatively low. Further, there has been an increase in the cost of papers and a decrease in advertising. A crisis has developed which mainly affects the quality press and therefore, the capacity of the media to inform and to lead debate. The thriving media are the most sensationalist. They are less likely to be *unprejudiced* in dealing with big issues. Regardless of the problems derived from the business relationships among the great media groups in Europe, the main newspapers will have a difficult time trying to influence the debate on the European challenges without falling prey to demagoguery. I fear they will surrender to voters' fears and compromise quality and objectivity in reporting and analysis.

In the newsrooms, we are often so busy doing the newspaper that we don't stop to think. The coverage of news becomes, as Patten says, simply a branch of consumer marketing. But we do

need to sell newspapers. And we feel a strong pressure from the electronic newspapers and from the radio and television channels. Important editorial decisions are often made on the run. I know this from 17 years' experience as a radio journalist. Similar pressures applying to newspaper as to the medium of radio. Given these constraints, tabloid journalist is often the outcome. Crime, scandals and sport. We think that this has to be our main catch for the reader. And I'm very interested in all that. But I stoutly defend the role of the press in dealing with issues of political, economic and social importance which exist within and throughout nations. If journalists are not interested in this, how can the readership be expected to? Why is the issue of EU enlargement so difficult to sell? It shouldn't be. There are major issues at stake with a huge transition process – both economically and politically – for many countries. Existing members will feel the pinch financially. But it is not easy to find a cover story on these issues.

The quality media must recognise that the important information needs to be presented. It should not gauge success by competing with the tabloid market on tabloid issues. The quality newspapers must gain or regain their good name to cover migratory issues and the associated rise of xenophobic sentiment in the EU. In difficult times such as times, failure to do so will betray the trust of the readers.