

## **After Lisbon: content and vision**

*The changes in our societies together with globalisation should determine our agenda.*

**Jos Van Gennip**

**Abstract** The gains made by the EPP in the 2009 European Parliament elections have given the party a new opportunity to advance its message. In the face of the weaknesses of current social models made apparent by the recent economic crisis, globalisation and changes in European society, Christian democracy could provide an alternative that balances the demands of a globalising world order and the desire to preserve the European social model. Further policy research is needed; however, recent socio-economic challenges and the political success of the EPP have shown that Christian democracy has a bright future.

**Keywords** Christian democracy – Globalisation – Economic and social crisis – Social market economy – European social model

### **A new and compelling mandate**

The period 2009–2014 brings a new mandate for the European People's Party. In June the voters of the European Union renewed their confidence in our movement. The Irish referendum removed the barriers for more powerful decision making at the European level and completed the third phase of the European Project. In these areas, Christian Democrats and related political parties played an indispensable role, just as they played a similar role earlier in the implementation of the Treaty of Rome, the completion of the Internal Market, and enlargement and the subsequent need for a more efficient decision-making structure.

Now is the moment for a new foundation of the unification process. Original goals such as peace, reconciliation and freedom have been achieved; a new generation seems to take them for granted and are unfamiliar with the underlying values that incited statesmen and constituencies alike to embark on the historic creation of the Union. War, poverty and the threat of dictatorship are past, but completely new challenges are arising. Globalisation is the overarching phenomenon of the beginning of the twenty-first century, and the need to address it is the new foundation and motivation for a stronger role for the Union. This stronger role is about preserving Europe's room to manoeuvre, and about taking greater responsibility for the health of the globe and the environment. That role puts the question of our distinct European identity in the centre. As became clear during the discussions about the European Constitutional Treaty, many thought this an awkward question and wanted to avoid it.

At the same time it is hard to give a forthright answer to the question of Europe's distinct identity, for the era of the cohesive, monocultural and religiously inspired European societies is over. We have to redraft our societies, and demographic, technological, economic, social and cultural changes have confronted us with the inescapable question: what kind of European society do we want to foster in this century?

### **The triangle**

In today's political discourse many people strongly prefer to avoid this foundational debate and to revert to pragmatic and activist solutions. Others fall back on an abstract answer of

preconceived values and norms, as if society and politics could be designed on a drawing board, without a view of reality. Still others are longing for the bygone world of simple, parochial and closed societies.

The success of Christian democracy and allied movements in twentieth-century Europe was that they followed a different path. Success was the result of a dialogue with reality, seen through the lenses of values and norms, and creating a vision and programmes for change, correction and the reinforcement of trends and realities. It comprised neither a denial of new developments nor an unconditional acceptance of them, but rather a redirection. At least twice in the recent history of Europe, the triangle of observation and expertise, values and norms, and subsequent visions and programmes has led to a new balance of reality and perspective that contributed decisively to a better society. At the beginning of the last century we concluded that modernisation and industrialisation were unavoidable, but we did not accept the accompanying poverty, proletarianisation and class struggle. As much as possible, we fostered the eradication of poverty and the preservation of human dignity, and we limited the unacceptable dimensions of the free market. This balance proved its relevance until the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Post-war Europe saw the balance between local, regional and national identities and a supranational and communal structure; this too proved to be very successful. The central question after Lisbon and in the years to come is whether the triangle of open observation, inspiring values and subsequent visions can again create balance among responsible European societies, given that pluriformity was and is the hallmark of the European Project and central to European identity.

### **The quality of the society first**

In the twentieth century, Christian social thinking was relevant primarily for socio-economic choices. Today, the socio-cultural dimension of our life and society has supplanted socio-economic issues. This sounds strange in a period when we are preoccupied with a financial crisis, but many analysts have come to the conclusion that this crisis has much to do with values, and our vision of humanity and society. The way out of the crisis requires another *attitude*—one that not favours the maximisation of profit, the culture of monetarisation and the dominance of shareholders value, or one that is rather only focused on better control and supervision. As was clearly emphasised at the recent EPP Conference in Bonn, the attitude has to do with our vision of the market economy in the process of globalisation. Indeed, the first question is *whether there is still room for one's own identity in a world characterised largely by a growing global dominance of one uniform culture*. This global culture is hedonistic, over-sexualised, secular, commercial, urban, individualistic and focused on self-realisation. The reaction in certain traditional cultures and religious communities is a rejection of this culture, together with its vehicles, modernisation and globalisation. However, the central question is whether we can connect with a global culture and at the same time create space for a distinct European identity and vision of market, society, social cohesion and the importance of values that are not defined in terms of money and profit. Establishing a new balance between modernity and tradition should be the first task in the establishment of new foundations for the European Project of the twenty-first century.

What is relevant for our continent is also relevant for the individual and the community. *Are the actual socio-cultural developments compatible with our vision of human dignity, sense of*

*community, respect for the weak and the elderly, and other cherished features of our societies?*

In most Western European and in a number of Central European countries, the composition of the population has changed dramatically. It now includes considerable minorities—and in certain urban areas, majorities—of immigrants and their children, with completely different cultural and religious backgrounds. At the same time, the ‘traditional’ majority has largely relinquished its own religious convictions and is even doubtful of its cultural identity. Europe is faced with a double dilemma: are we still a Christian continent and part of a Christian civilisation, the ‘Christian West,’ or are we a culturally empty destination for immigrants? Connected with this question is another: *are there enough bridges and binding values among the different segments of the population to maintain some form of social cohesion?* The level of social cohesion will probably become the most far-reaching challenge for the decades to come. Will immigrants be assimilated, and will this assimilation be based on an acceptance of their different cultural and religious backgrounds, including their behavioural and public expressions? Will immigrants respect their own identity whilst trying to forge common bonds? Or will they recognise and adapt to a dominant culture characterised by its European history and its religious roots?

Another socio-cultural dilemma with far-reaching consequences is the trend towards hyper-individualism and the marginalisation of community ties. Lifelong marital bonds are under threat as is integration into the local community. However, individualism can also be an expression of self-realisation and an optimisation of one’s capabilities and talents. *But how can we combine the irreversible trend of individualism with a human society’s need for binding and stable engagements?* Children need stable families; the quality of our communities depends on voluntary service; and the public sector needs responsible, sometimes even selfless service. For a humane society, community participation is essential, as is the conviction that self-realisation is possible only in relation to others and to their communities and institutions, and that these institutions and fellow human beings likewise require ideals, service and fidelity.

This is all the more relevant when it comes to the tension between personal autonomy and ethical consensus. The combination of secularisation and increased personal autonomy has created strong tensions in the public debate on ethical regulations. The issues are manifold: abortion, euthanasia, marriage between same-sex partners, human genetic engineering, biotechnology in general and the protection of animals. The breakthrough in new biotechnologies, in particular, comes exactly at a time when consensus amongst citizens about ethical issues is practically non-existent. The big question, then, is *whether politicians should pursue the principle of laissez-faire, or whether there should be at least some societal agreement on the use and limitations of new techniques.*

Other issues of culture and civilisation also extend to the political level. For one, there is the *monetisation of the meaning of life*, the reduction of the meaning of life to what one earns and the capital one owns. This often goes hand in hand with a reduction of the worth of people to their economic or technical usefulness. Limiting human value to economics and functionality contributes to the widespread feeling of alienation and anonymity. Politics cannot offer the ultimate remedy, but in areas such as healthcare, education and social services policies can either reinforce or correct this phenomenon.

Then there is the victim culture amongst citizens that, according to a number of sociologists and ethicists, threatens to undermine the convictions and attitudes which have been foundational to the prosperity of the West. Again, politics cannot directly reverse this sometimes dramatic side effect of the welfare state. The real question is whether the parties of the EPP can make an effort to foster a new conviction among citizens that the state is not all-powerful and that a new balance is needed between a helping hand from the government and one's own responsibility.

Thus it is clear that the socio-cultural dimension is *the* overwhelming challenge of our times, and we need a new balance between the aforementioned trends and the objective conditions for a humane and stable society. The state cannot impose a change in convictions or values, but it can develop the conditions which will enable citizens and their institutions to communicate values other than the culturally dominant ones, such as protection of the family, support for non-commercial television and freedom of education for parents.

In the domain of demographics, a change in attitudes and a (likely dramatic) change in politics are urgently required. In light of the projections, our political family should give priority to these changes, to enable a new balance between labour participation and care for children by women *and* men.

### **But what about the economy?**

Nevertheless, one still cannot overlook the enormous relevance of the 'traditional' socio-economic challenge, even though the struggle against poverty has been won largely and with sometimes dramatic exceptions inside the Union. This challenge has now taken on the form of *globalisation and European socio-economic survival*. The quest to maintain our prosperity is high on the agenda. Europe's population is ageing, enjoys more holidays than the rest of the world, is heavily protected and has ample space to follow a path of 'self-realisation' instead of being preoccupied with the longer-term demands of the market. Can this workforce compete with the highly skilled, hard working, but lesser-earning, workforce from the emerging economic forces of the South? And is a rat race to the bottom—i.e., the lowering of labour conditions—a solution? Is it possible to achieve a balance between accepting the phenomenon of globalisation and preserving a distinct European economic and social model? The answer has far reaching implications for the reform of the welfare state, to which the Christian social tradition has contributed with its view of the social market economy. But let us not lose sight of changing circumstances. When the model was introduced about sixty years ago, illness or unemployment often meant hunger for the family. Then, people had jobs at one workplace for their lifetime. Today, labour mobility and continuous education are demanded. And there is a new abuse: the remuneration of top managers without reference to their real engagement and efforts.

Even more striking will be the need for a new balance between *economic growth, protection of the environment and climate change*. This dilemma has been well known for the last twenty-five years. The demise of Communism and the subsequent *improvement* of the environment demonstrated that, at least in certain phases, economic growth can go together with environmental improvement and the reduced use of scarce resources. The Christian social tradition, a strong defender of labour, has not played a significant role in this domain. But values such as stewardship, justice and solidarity, together with a new economic order that aims for sustainable development, create room for a redistribution of the environmental burdens in favour of underdeveloped societies. Respect for Creation in all its diversity can be

the basis for an economy that favours conservation and takes into consideration the interests of future generations and of the Earth. The exit from the current financial crisis can be found in the new demands of the environment and in the new scarcities of energy, water and food that dictate changes of production and consumption. The accelerated process of climate change makes this dilemma within the context of the new socio-economic agenda the highest priority.

The real threat to a balanced socio-economic policy and a coherent society is the insidious attack on the European economic order, the 'Rhineland Model'. The Rhineland Model is an effort to reconcile labour and capital, but also aims to provide space for SMI's and family firms that provide continuity and generate employment yet are not registered on the stock market. What we need in all our countries is an approach supportive of small and medium-sized enterprises and individual entrepreneurs.

### **Indispensable in an insecure world**

There is one domain in which the Lisbon Treaty urgently demands a coherent vision from the EPP. That is the area of the external responsibilities of the Union. The Treaty gives us the tools for taking efficient action that is more urgently needed than ever before, even as national interests often still impede international engagements.

The nuclear threat can easily come back in new forms and there is the serious chance of cyber warfare. There is the blurring of the borders between private and state criminality, with the likely possibility that criminal groups have weapons of mass destruction at their disposal. Furthermore, there is the danger of local conflicts escalating into regional and even global ones. Starting with the Middle East, there are numerous unresolved conflicts that potentially can spoil world peace in the future.

In a globalising world, major domestic problems cannot be resolved without taking into account their global dimensions. And security is indivisible: state security and private security, 'hard power' and 'soft power' come together in 'human security.' This is the new reality of the twenty-first century. Balancing the reality of globalisation with the virtues and values of justice, compassion and solidarity is the new priority for politics and society.

This new reality demands first of all a re-evaluation of the traditional identification of national defence with national territory. A globalised world is borderless, and in any case, terrorists do not recognise geographical borders. This makes peacekeeping operations beyond one's borders imperative. Moreover, severe and systematic violations of human rights should likewise lead us to consider national borders to be relative.

### **Society, values, politics**

We the EPP received our new mandate, after the last elections and after the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty at a moment of deep change in our societies and in the economy, and at a time when we face- the threat of climate change and the reality of a new multi-polar geopolitical environment. These realities demand a period of strong research, and deliberation about how to implement this historic mandate. Here we must learn from each other. Honouring the principle of subsidiarity, we can identify common challenges which demand different answers on national levels. Still, even in matters of national competence we have common European concerns, such as in the domain of demographics and social cohesion; our experiences and

solutions can be valuable for others. In other domains of primarily national responsibility, such as media policy or the technology of genetics, European regulation can have decisive influence. Then there is of course the level where the Union has its primary or exclusive competence.

Our new research institute, the Centre for European Studies (CES), was founded exactly at the right time. Together with our cooperating think tanks and scientific institutes it can play a vital role. Above all, we need to interest and to engage a new generation which is not familiar with the original motives for the foundation of the European Project and which sometimes has lost its confidence in politics and political parties. Research and education are needed more than ever, and there is a need for conferences, summer courses, publications and studies around these themes. This approach has been further elaborated in my essay, *Society, Values, Politics*, available at the website of CES.

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