



January 30th, 2007

[Contact Us](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Search:](#)

Go

Home**News**[Archives](#)[Live news feed](#)**Business**[Exchange Rates](#)[Banking & Finance](#)[Movers & Shakers](#)[10 Questions](#)[Tech & Telecom](#)[Business Directory](#)**Opinion**[Commentary](#)[Postview](#)**Night & Day**[Cinema Review](#)[Restaurant Review](#)[Gallery Review](#)**Tempo****Special Sections**[Real Estate](#)[Schools&Education](#)[Health & Medicine](#)**Real Estate**[Rent](#)[Sales](#)**Book of Lists**[Purchase online](#)[BOL Online](#)**Information**[This week's RSS feed](#)**RSS**[Best of Prague](#)[Book shop](#)[Classifieds](#)[For Rent](#)[Job Offers](#)[Sponsored events](#)[Partner Hotels](#)[Visitor Information](#)[Dining Out Guide](#)[Alan Levy Tributes](#)**Services**[Subscribe](#)[Archives](#)[Photo Service](#)[Related Sites](#)[About Us](#)[Contact Us](#)**ADVERTISE with us**[Classifieds](#)[Online and Print](#)**Sidelined in Berlin**

Big powers meeting behind closed doors damages the idea of integration and democracy

By Richard Laming

The Prague Post
 (February 26, 2004)

When Gerhard Schroder, Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair gathered in Berlin recently for their trilateral summit, everyone remarked on how well they have patched up their differences since the war in Iraq. This is certainly a good thing. But the Feb. 18 summit could also mark the beginning of a new and unwelcome feature of European politics.

The danger is that the important decisions will be taken away from European Union institutions and returned to the world of secret diplomacy. The common European interest risks being sidelined in Berlin.

It is fine that different groups of member states gather to prepare their positions for future debates in the EU. It is a sign of normal politics that they do so. But they should not act in a divisive manner when they do. The reaction of some of the other member states shows that this is exactly what is happening.

It is made worse by the experience of the December 2003 summit in Brussels that debated the draft European constitution.

One of the main problems then was the sense among the Spanish and Polish that they were being excluded from major decisions in the EU. It hardly makes sense now to convene a three-power summit in Berlin to prove this.

The Spanish-Polish case against double-majority voting was that it would enable a permanent coalition of the very large (providing 60 percent of the population) and the very small (providing 50 percent of the member states) to make every decision. Medium-size member states risk losing out: too small to exercise influence and too large to be easily recruited to the coalition. Mistaken as it might be, that was their case.

Defenders of double-majority voting argued, among other things, that coalitions within the Council of Ministers arise on the basis of the issues at stake rather than on the simple question of size. The Spanish-Polish fear is unfounded. It is hardly helpful for that case, however, when the largest member states behave in the way they are now doing. In their resort to intergovernmental diplomacy, they could be a little more diplomatic.

But the objection to these summits is not only on grounds of diplomacy: It is also on grounds of democracy. For what is the legitimacy and accountability of the Berlin summit?

Who was represented there? Only the three largest member states. This might suit the United Kingdom, France and Germany, but it has nothing to offer the Czech Republic, Poland or any other nation.

Secondly, it won't suit the citizens of the countries that are actually present -- only their governments. The only people involved in such summits are national governments and their civil servants, and all the discussions and decisions take place behind closed doors.

There is no way that the ordinary voter can influence what is going on, and even finding out what is discussed will be almost impossible. Very often at summits we find out more about what the leaders ate than about what they said.

It is all in such contrast with recent developments in the EU.

The EU has been an extraordinary success over the last 50 years because of the way it has brought democracy into the conduct of international politics. Every country, no matter how large or small, is represented in the decision-making process. Decisions are made according to something resembling the normal rules of parliamentary representative government. And the whole system is governed by a set of rules so that everyone knows what their rights are.

Perhaps this description of the EU is a bit too rosy -- reality has yet to catch up with the ambition -- but that is the direction Europe is going. There is a clear difference between the way the EU works and any other international body. The opinions of citizens in countries large and small actually matter. Diplomacy is slowly being replaced by democracy.

Ads by Google

Prague**apartments**

Gothic style building by the Old Town Square

www.maximgroup.biz

Boutique hotel in Prague

Alchemist - luxury boutique hotel in Prague Downtown - Spa available!

www.alchymisthotel.com

Prague Central Apartments

Unique location rentals Discounted winter rates !

www.prague4u.cz

Top 340 Prague Hotels

Great Deals on Prague Hotels - Save up to 75% - Final Rates, No Extras!

visitprague.cz

[Advertise on this site](#)

And the European constitution, if it can be agreed on, will take this transformation a stage further. If it cannot be agreed on, more summits along the Berlin model will be the alternative. That trend would be a real setback for Europe.

Without the European constitution, the role of the European Commission as guardian of the common European interest will remain too weak. The danger is that European decision-making will simply fall into the hands of the three largest member states. A small country such as the Czech Republic will find itself pushed to the margins.

There is a lesson here both for enthusiasts of European integration and for its critics. The debate has changed from being whether Europe should be governed to how Europe should be governed. Even opponents of European integration have started drafting their own versions of the constitution.

The absence of a constitution does not mean the absence of European decisions -- only that they will be taken in secret by the government leaders of the largest member states.

No defender of democracy, European or national, can be happy with that.

-- The writer is director of Federal Union, the British federalist campaigning organization, and works in public affairs for commercial interests in London and Brussels. He writes here in a personal capacity.

Print View

E-mail story

Comment

The Prague Post Online contains a selection of articles that have been printed in *The Prague Post*, a weekly newspaper published in the Czech Republic.

To subscribe to the print paper, [click here](#).

Unauthorized reproduction is strictly prohibited.
