

[Comment] Sidelined in Berlin

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - When Gerhard Schröder, Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair gather in Berlin today for their trilateral summit, everyone will be remarking on how well they have patched up their differences since the war in Iraq. This is certainly a good thing. But the summit could also be the beginning of a new and unwelcome feature of European politics.

The danger is that the important decisions will be taken away from the EU institutions and returned to the world of secret diplomacy.

It is fine that different groups of member states should gather together 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 summit in Brussels last December 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 the major decisions in the EU; it hardly makes sense now to convene a three-power summit in Berlin to prove it.

The Spanish-Polish case against double majority voting was that it would enable a permanent coalition of the very large (providing 60 per cent of the population) and the very small (providing 50 per cent of the member states) to take every decision. Medium-sized member states risk losing out: too small to exercise influence; 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. However, it is hardly helpful for that case 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.

Democracy and diplomacy

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?

Only a minority of Europeans will be represented there, the meetings will take place in private rather than in public, there will be no parallel parliamentary accountability. Of all the features and innovations that have made the European Union so successful, the summit in Berlin will incorporate none of them.

The threat of European decision-making falling into the hands of the three largest member states shows how important it is that the European Constitution is agreed and ratified. At present, the European Commission is sidelined in Berlin, along with the common European interest that it represents.

And this is a lesson both for enthusiasts for European integration and for its critics. The debate changed during the Convention from being whether Europe should be governed to how Europe should be governed. Even opponents of European integration 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 can be happy with that.

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