

Working Draft only**Democracy in Europe: An Imperfect Union**

Ladies and gentlemen, friends and colleagues

You have asked me to speak to you of democracy in Europe, and reasonably enough. I am a citizen of the European Union, a person of European culture, committed to European democracy. However, I am also a philosopher, concerned with ideas and ideals that know no boundaries. Democracy for me is not just a matter of the ways we Europeans cast our votes, constitute our parliaments or choose our prime ministers. Philosophically speaking, democracy is an ideal – the audacious idea that *All humans are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights*, as your Founding Fathers aptly put it. It is the great vision – this time in the words of President Lincoln – of a *government of the people, for the people and by the people*. That ideal is as much American as it is European. So I shall speak of democracy in Europe, rather than of European democracy. It is the ideal that matters.

That ideal, to be sure, has grown from European roots. There is the ancient Greek conviction that all humans, however lowly, bear within them the spark of reason and so are capable of understanding critically and deciding responsibly. It has grown no less from the Hebraic and Christian faith that all humans are precious in the sight of their Creator and worthy of respect. It culminated in the European Enlightenment which ushered in the modern age with the idea of democracy as we know it.

That Enlightenment, linked with names like Voltaire and Rousseau, Kant and Herder – and of course your Benjamin Franklin – was first and foremost a revolt against the stifling authority of tradition. All through the Middle Ages tradition had been the ultimate court of appeal, whether in reading the scripture, studying the ways of nature or ordering public affairs. *Whatever all men at all times and in all places have always believed, surely is The Truth*. So there have always been masters and slaves, lords whose lot it is to rule in abundance and drudges whose lot it is to labour in want. It must be God's will that it be so. The age of the baroque derived from that the alleged *divine right of kings* as well as justification for the privileges of a few and the faceless drudgery of the many.

The Enlightenment cut through all such pious fraud with a radical alternative – not tradition, but critical reason and noble sentiment are the source of all truth. Experience examined by reason can reveal what is natural and so also true and good, naturally suited to humans. What the religious reformers proclaimed in matters of Scripture, the men and women of the Enlightenment applied universally. So both critical reason and fellow-feeling teach us that it is not natural for some humans to lord it over others. All humans, guided by critical reason and moral sensitivity, can themselves discover what is natural and right and live up to it.

Thus the modern democratic ideal grew out of the conviction that all humans, however lowly, bear within them the promise of full, mature humanity. The task of the society is not to rule but to create the prerequisites for all persons to grow to the full stature of their humanity so that all can live together in freedom, mutual respect and good will. Or, as the French put it, to live in *Liberté, égalité, fraternité!* With that noble ideal the Enlightenment sowed the seed of which modern democracy could grow.



However, even while sowing the seeds of democracy, the Enlightenment sowed the seeds of discord – of the two fundamental problems which Europeans, groping for the mechanisms of democracy in the XIXth century, would come to call *the social question* and *the national question*. Today we might speak of the problem of social justice and the problem of multiculturalism, though the two issues are the same now as then. Those are not contingent flaws which we could readily correct. Rather, they are tragic in the classic sense – flaws that follow from the great virtues of the democratic revolution.

Thus in discarding tradition in the name of Reason, the Enlightenment radically liberated the individual - but at the same time fragmented society no less radically. With the individual supreme, there no longer remain any constraints on individual greed and ruthlessness. Beneath a residual veneer of civilisation, what remains is unbridled greed, leading to a self-destructive war of all against all. As in any war, here, too, the strong and ruthless will prevail, leaving the democratic dream of living together in freedom, good will and mutual respect in shambles.

Democracy was the audacious hope that the *demos* – all the people, the entire population – can at the same time be the *polis* – the community of active participating citizens. That vision is not compatible with demeaning penury which denies human dignity to the many. Nor is it compatible with senseless abundance which exempts a few from common human cares. Yet that is precisely what a free-for-all of competing egoisms repeatedly produces.

Thus in making the individual supreme, the Enlightenment at the same time created the problem of caring for social justice and for all the needs that reach beyond individual need and greed, be they common or long range needs. How shall we attend to common and long-range needs in a society of individuals concerned each with their short range personal profit? How can we build a democracy in a society polarised between an elite exempt from human responsibility and a mass of drudges deprived of human dignity? That is the core of *the social question*.



The Enlightenment gave rise to a second question as well. Sweeping away the traditional hierarchic order, it freed individuals from the constraints of birth but also deprived them of an assured place and of the sense of worth and dignity it provided. Humans long used to having a place, however lowly, in a communal order suddenly found themselves stripped of all identity. Yet human dignity and sense of personal worth are easily the two most basic human needs. In America, the proliferation of fraternal organizations among immigrants testified to the need of the displaced for a group identity. In Europe, ethnic identity, based on shared memories, shared land and language and shared hopes provided a ready substitute. Here, too, the virtue of the ideal gave birth to its fatal flaw. It is not surprising that the age of democracy proved to be also the age of virulent and vicious nationalism.

Ethnic identity based on cherishing a cultural tradition is an immensely enriching component in any society. Without it, all that remains is the lonely crowd. However, in a radically disrupted age such identity is far more likely to be based on fear and hate of all who differ. Hitler could harness a wave of nationalism by appealing to deeply ingrained anti-Semitism, fear and hatred of a minority which differed. We may not know just who we are, but shared hate and fear of *those others*, hate and fear gives us a sense of cohesion. The Nazis

called it *Kulturkampf*, in whose name they sought to eliminate entire ethnic groups. Today, the old Nazi idea has been translated into English and sanitised as *the clash of cultures* (or of *civilisations*) whose proponents seldom are particularly cultured or civilised. That, at its core, is *the national question*: how do you assure social cohesion among isolated sovereign individuals?

Neither *the social question* nor *the national question* is a fortuitous flaw which will heal with time. Rather, they are the inevitable by-product – or, as you people might say, the *collateral damage* – of a noble ideal. The story of modern European democracy is one of failures and successes in coping with them.

Democracy in America, to be sure, was not exempt from those two problems. Its situation, though, was different. It had the incredible abundance of an entire continent to ameliorate the consequences of unbridled greed. Then, too, except for the War between the States, its ethnic conflicts were not confrontations without quarter between political entities. For the most part, they were internal quarrels among groups of immigrants of diverse origins. Democracy in America also had to cope with greed and fear. Thereof, though, you are better qualified to speak than I. Let me therefore focus on what I know, the vicissitudes of democracy in Europe, its groping in the nineteenth century, its crisis and collapse between the two world wars, its immense dual achievement in the latter half of the XXth century, the social state and the European Union – and the disquieting indications of another deadly crisis ahead.



For European democracy, the nineteenth century was a time of groping and experimentation. Perhaps its most central need was to clarify just who or what is the *demos* that rules in a *demo(s)cracy*.

One answer emerged from the common structure European societies. For centuries, they had been highly stratified in wealth, with the stratification codified in an elaborate system of titles and prerogatives. The effect, though, was simple. There were those who laboured, care-worn women and men with calloused hands. Those were the drudges or, collectively, *the people*. Then there were the others, with soft hands and fine clothes, their leisure bought by the drudgery of the many. Those were the drones, aristocrats with their layer of

servants parasitic on them. In a society so structured building democracy could seem deceptively simple: eliminate the aristocrats, what will remain will be *the people*.

It took Europe nearly a century to realise that the rule of a mob of drudges is not enough to constitute a democracy. Removing institutional privilege, be they titles of nobility or the *leading role of the Communist Party in society*, long encoded in Soviet bloc constitutions, may be highly desirable, but it is not enough. Only slowly the recognition emerged that building democracy is not just a matter of rotating *the rulers* but rather of *changing the nature of rule*.

This is where the heritage of Enlightenment reason – personified by Immanuel Kant – enters into the Romantic vision of *the common people*, setting bounds to the power of rule, including the rule of the *demos*, the people. We have grown accustomed to the rather unfortunate language of “human rights”, confusing human rights with individual sense of entitlement. Yet we need not resort to the legal language of “rights”. We can say that there simply are some needs whose meeting is essential to preserving human dignity and self-respect, regardless of individual preference. No ruling power can deprive its subjects of the wherewithal of meeting those needs without depriving them of their humanity at the same time. Democracy is not possible without a respect for the dignity and integrity of all persons.

The idea of respect for that dignity – or of “human rights” – proved an important corrective to the arrogance of momentary majorities. Yes, the people, all the people, need participate in the care for public weal, preventing a distinction between the rulers and the ruled. But even the rule of the people has its limits. Even *the people* – as, in the classic example, the German *Volk* – cannot deprive even a small minority, be it the Jews, the Roma, the Slavs, of the wherewithal of human dignity and sense of worth.

That dual recognition, of the sovereignty of the people and of the inviolability of persons, was the great achievement of European democracy in the century between the French revolution and the Great War – which would soon go down in history as only the *First*. It was no small feat. On the eve of that cataclysmic generation of wars, European democracy, rather like its American counterpart, had largely resolved its theoretical problems. Yet in the war which Mr Wilson waged *to make the world safe for democracy* European

democracy collapsed in what was then called *the crisis of democracy* as public opinion all over Europe shifted toward authoritarian alternatives, either the conservative authoritarianism of Europe-wide fascism or the revolutionary authoritarianism of German Nazism and, ironically, of Soviet Communism.



What happened? I am going to suggest that between the wars European democracy collapsed because it failed to resolve either the social or the national question. America solved its national question, albeit in a rough and ready way, by fighting a civil war which, *de iure* at least, established multiethnic equality as the law of the land. Then, in the 1930s, it tackled its social question with will and determination. Europe, devastated by war, disrupted by social transformations and paralysed by a heritage of hate and conflict, by and large did neither.

Germany provides perhaps the clearest example. Its pre-war society was rigidly stratified. Under Chancellor Bismarck, its government made an effort to alleviate the plight of *the lower orders*. Already in the 1880s, Bismarck introduced what a hundred years later would become the mark of civilised societies, a national health insurance and a national pension scheme. Yet those rudiments of democracy were of little avail in a confrontation with the collusion of imperial and financial interests, represented by powerful military interests interwoven with equally powerful industrial cartels in an early manifestation of what President Eisenhower would much later call the *military-industrial complex*. With British imperial expansion as its model, that complex fostered popular nationalism and with its help was able to push war credits through the Parliament in spite of its social democratic majority.

Individual Germans largely experienced the collapse of the Empire as a personal collapse as well. The entire social structure which assured individuals a minimum of human dignity and self-respect vanished. With the humiliation which the Allies visited upon the defeated Germany even the vicarious self-respect of ethnic identity was gone. The new republican regime – the *Weimar republic* – sought strenuously to build a democratic social structure and to foster democratic social values. That effort, though, received little support from abroad. The Western powers sought to “punish” it for the sins of its predecessor. The lower classes, devastated by the depression, demanded

radical change. They supported the parties of radical rhetoric, whether Communist or Nazi. The middle classes, humiliated by the inflation, sought comfort in nationalism. The rich, seeking a *bulwark against bolshevism*, were willing to finance Hitler's brand of fanaticism.

German democracy, sustained for the most part by the social democrats, proved powerless against the passions unleashed by the unsolved social and national question. The Communists offered a radical solution, howbeit illusory, to the social question. The Nazis offered both ethnic pride and social relief. Never mind that the new ethnic pride was based on a rather self-fulfilling evoking of enemies on all sides, from the Jewish peril through the Bolshevik threat to the perfidious Albion.

Inventing enemies and parading threats is an effective strategy for gaining public support. And never mind that the social relief was based almost entirely fuelled by feverish military spending which ultimately had to be justified (and paid for) by a war of conquest. For the moment, the brown uniforms, the torchlight parades, the powerful impetus of fear and hate gave enough Germans a sense of self-respect and personal worth. Pride for the humiliated, gain for the impoverished, overwhelmed the temperate supporters of democracy.

The particulars were different from country to country. In some countries traditionalist variation on Italian fascism responded to the longing for order and meaning. In some of those they allied themselves with traditional ecclesiastical structure for whom democracy meant loss of secular power. In Czechoslovakia, whose tradition was democratic, the same desire for order and meaning helped sustain the one democracy east of the Rhine until the wave of nationalism destroyed it from within and without. In France, democracy held more by habit than by conviction and the German onslaught readily evoked a fascist regime, much as in Norway. The war fought to *make the world safe for democracy* led, as such wars will, to a crisis and a collapse of European democracy.



European democracy was reborn out of the war which brought about its collapse. The indifferent millions who found themselves locked in a bitter conflict with German Nazism and domestic fascism were determined not to

repeat the mistakes of their fathers. To them, the lesson was clear: democracy cannot succeed without resolving the social question and the national question. In spite of the understandable wave of hatred of the former victims for all things German, in the post war decades European democrats made a determined drive toward national and multicultural toleration. Similarly, in spite of the distorting effect of Soviet “socialism”, European democrats made a massive effort at building a social state. The great triumph of European democracy, the social state and the European Union, is a direct result of the bitter failure of the attempt to build a democracy which would be solely political, leaving both social conscience and ethnic tolerance to the invisible hand of the market or of social passions. European democracy has learned its lesson.

This is crucial. First and foremost, there is the recognition that human dignity and sense of worth are not just a matter of good will, as we hear Christmas after Christmas with little visible difference. Perhaps in the never-never land of yeoman farmers with ample land to till it might have been the case that a sense of dignity and self-worth were simply a matter of endeavour and imagination, though even that ignores the reality of very unequal individual endowment. In a complex modern society, such an image is wholly illusory. Democracy, to be possible, needs also be social, assuring all its citizens equal access to the wherewithal of basic human dignity. Some things need be simply a matter of course.

Thus in all of Europe, it is simply a matter of course that every citizen of the European Union has a right to medical care. Individual countries seek to assure that right in various ways. Some, like England, have a National Health programme. Others, including my own Czech Republic, have a national health insurance which is financed by payroll deductions but covers all Czechs, regardless of status. Then there are various ways of financing hospitals, some teaching hospitals directly, others by municipalities and there have even been some not very successful attempts at patient-financed hospitals. Similarly there are numerous ways of financing medical schools and ancillary health services. One thing, though, is clear – the first question a doctor or a hospital asks a patient needs be “Where does it hurt?” not “How do you propose to pay

for it?" Public health is a public matter, and needs be financed by the entire public, not just by the person who needs care.

The same is true of education. Public education, too, is a public need. Illiterate voters hurt not only themselves, but the entire community. Simply as a matter of survival, a democracy needs to provide opportunities for education for all its citizens. Not only for the wealthy. Not only for those willing to take on a massive debt. For all. Public education needs be financed by the community as a whole and be freely available to all people seeking it. Again, there are many ways of administering public educational systems and assuring their freedom from interference, but one thing is clear: a democracy needs to educate all its citizens. It is hard to speak of human dignity if one is ill and ill-trained.

The third need usually mentioned is that of security in old age. To a European democrat the idea of people living out their lives in penury after they toiled honestly all their lives because someone tunneled out their company's pension plan seems preposterous. The entire society, all of us, owe a debt to the elderly. Definitely, there should be opportunity and encouragement to save up for old age. Still, there needs be a social scheme that would assure dignified old age to all. A country without a national pension scheme, no matter how affluent, remains a third world country just as a country which does not assure its citizens health care and educational opportunities.

The list could go on to include other needs, such as sanitary waste disposal, access to potable water and or a healthy environment. Those – and many others – are from an European perspective needs which require solidarity among humans and among generations. It might well be in short term personal interest of the owner to clear-but his forest, mine the topsoil and then the gravel beneath it and then cover it with asphalt for a parking lot or subdivide it into what is usually described as "generous quarter acre lots." However, it is essential to the society as a whole to retain a certain percentage of the land as forest, both to assure carbon absorption and water retention. That, too, is a social responsibility, just like the maintenance of public transportation systems which may not make a profit but which keep our cities from being clogged with traffic and our climate protected from green-house gas emissions.

A socially democratic state is ultimately one which accepts responsibility for the common good. Not, to be sure, by taking over individual responsibility or effort. The Soviet Union tried that. Its attempt at a social state without democracy proved a failure, though in the immediate post war years many people newly under Soviet control consoled themselves that at least the Communist-ruled state would solve social problems. In a way, it did, though at a horrendous cost. In taking away people's freedom, it undercut their human dignity viciously. It will take two generations at least to recover it. A social state has first of all to be democratic. Experience taught us, however, that it needs to be socially democratic. The great triumph of European democracy in the forty years between the mid-1950s and the mid-1990s was that it largely solved the social question by creating a community of socially democratic states.



The second great triumph of European democracy in that period was the creation of the European Union. Only if you can imagine the United States divided by sharply watched boundaries, with armed militias nervously watching the militias on the other side, with young people taught to hate and fear their counterparts on the other side of the border – and intensify that by the habit of generations – can you imagine what living in Europe was like in the years of my childhood. To me, the word *Berlin* evoked images of fear and hate, something like your various “axes of evil.”

Today, I need not even my passport to cross the line. My citizen ID, used rather the way you use your driving licenses, is enough, though no one bothers to check it. I have walked the streets of Berlin, looking in vain for a good German restaurant, and ended up choosing between an excellent Iranian and a no less excellent Thai one. What matters, though, is not that easy multiculturalism but rather the shift in attitude. Europeans are gradually getting over the post-war habit of considering themselves bit players in a world owned jointly by the United States and the Soviet Union. Europe today has greater population as well as economy than the United States or Russia and is prepared to play the role of an equal in a multi-polar world. Yes, militarily, the United States is still by far the most powerful country in terms of sheer throw weight of its armaments and its thousands nuclear missiles. However, in a world in which the great and pressing danger is poverty, ecological degradation

and institutional collapse that military power is not overly relevant. Altogether, the European Union can play the role of an equal partner.

There are glitches, to be sure. The process of European unification is at the moment bogged down at the stage which the United States reached in 1781 when the Articles of Confederation replaced the Articles of Association of the Revolutionary war era. Now Europe needs to move to a full fledged federal union, under whatever euphemism. That delay, however, does not cast serious doubt on the assertion that with the achievement of the social state and of the European Union European democracy by the mid-1990s reached achieved a double triumph, building a democracy which managed to solve both its national and its social question.



In 1994, I could have ended on that triumphant note. Fifteen years later, though, there are troublesome cracks appearing in the edifice of European democracy. Vicious xenophobic nationalism is reappearing, and not only in the relatively mild form of Austria's Heider or Italy's embarrassing Mr. Berlusconi. In Hungary, the Hungarian Guards, virulently racist, seem a reincarnation of Hitler's SA. Democratic parties dare not oppose them; the tide of public opinion is too strong. Just across the border, the social democratic government in Slovakia can ill contain a similar wave. Even in traditionally democratic Denmark and Norway, the rot of racism is shaking its foundations. The European Union is hard put to stem the tide.

This time, the reason is fairly clear. It lacks jurisdiction. The process of European unification has been too slow. The European Union remains an imperfect union. It is hampered by the requirement of unanimity in basic decisions and even more by lacking a central power of uniform taxation. This is crucial. The foundation of the entire European triumph is the social state, assuring social consensus. However, individual tax payers cannot sustain it alone. Financing a social state requires a corporate taxation level of some thirty to thirty three per cent.

Of itself, that is in no way excessive and Europe had no difficulty in maintaining it in the 1950s and 1960s. However, since tax rates are set by individual member states, much as under the American Articles of Confederation, countries tend to undercut each other in their bid for

industries. Ireland achieved an economic miracle, albeit at the cost of a social disaster, by lowering its corporate tax rate to an effective level of some eleven percent. That story is repeated in country after country. Individual tax payers, primarily employees in lower and middle brackets, who cannot escape the tax man, are left alone to carry the whole load. The result is “economies” in public spending, gradually eroding the social state. With its financial basis vanishing, the social state is likely to disintegrate, leaving behind all it obviated, social unrest with a rise of ethnic hatred and calls for strong rule. The scenario is familiar from earlier crisis of democracies the 1930s.

There are solutions, of course. The most obvious one is to agree a uniform corporate tax rate for the entire Union, or even better, for the entire globe, on a UN level, though that is today entirely utopian. There are more modest measures, such as an Europe wide Primary Source Tax which would require that profits be taxed where they are generated rather than at the nominal corporate home base. Protectionism is not a solution, but taxation of long distance shipping might be. Altogether, with the future of democracy at stake, there need be ways, and there are.

Is there, though, the political will? That is far more problematic. Massive corporate investment in brain washing can convince voters to vote against their own interest. Short-sighted selfishness is no less rife among countries than among individuals. Ireland blocked the passage of the new constitution, the Lisbon Treaty, precisely out of fear that central power of taxation will deprive it of its ability to undercut its neighbours in lowering corporate tax rates. Then, too, there is the power of fear and hate which rulers use to manipulate the masses but which, Golem like, acquires a life of its own. It is not premature to speak of another crisis of European democracy.

It would be premature, though, to think an outcome like that of the 1930s inevitable. Europe today has both a tradition of democracy and social resources it lacked ninety years ago, exhausted by war and depression. This time, we might succeed in overcoming the crisis.

This much, though, is clear – democracy can survive only if it can solve both its social and its national question. That may in fact be our great advantage in facing the crisis of democracy. In the 1930s, our fathers were at a

loss what to do. We know what needs be done. With God's help, we shall find the will to do it.