

spotlight europe

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A Chance for Wise Men

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The general orientation of the European Union can be reshaped by a committee of wise men. At least that is what Nicolas Sarkozy thinks should happen. If such a committee of wise men is to be a success, it will be of the utmost importance to prevent it from being instrumentalized in the political arena. Furthermore, what in fact is needed is a true European debate and not merely the development of specific strategies behind closed doors.

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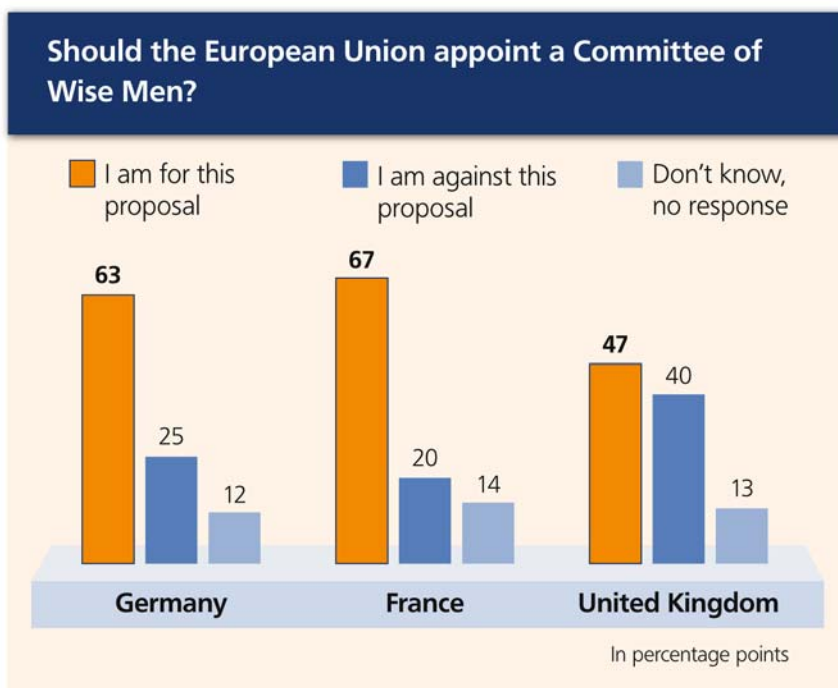
French President Nicolas Sarkozy has once again caused a stir among European policymakers. On 27 August 2007, in his [keynote speech](#) on foreign policy, he suggested the appointment of a committee of wise men whose task would be to think about the future of the European Union. Sarkozy believes that the committee, which will consist of ten or twelve highly respected personalities, should present a plan for the development of the EU until the year 2030 in time for the European elections in 2009. It would refer to both geographical issues and matters of content. If the committee was to be instituted, Sarkozy would be prepared to give up his opposition to the EU's ongoing accession negotiations with Turkey.

What is the point about a committee of wise men?

Sarkozy's proposals and his implicit criticism that there is no debate about the future have touched a raw nerve in the European Union. Although originally initiated by the Commission with "Plan D", the debate has simply not taken place. It is true, of course, that the conflicts associated with the European Constitution meant that the subject of political power in Europe caused some commotion. However, in the final analysis a discussion of how Europe should look like in the future politically failed to materialize. The question

to which extent Europe should be deepened and widened still is not answered. A committee of wise men could take this as its starting point and then proceed to define the path the EU ought to pursue.

As is demonstrated by a [recent Bertelsmann Foundation survey](#) which was conducted between 18 and 22 September 2007, the majority of the electorates in



Germany, France and the United Kingdom is in favour of appointing a committee of wise men. 65 per cent of German interviewees and 67 per cent of French interviewees support Sarkozy's proposals. In the case of the British interviewees, those in favour (47 per cent) also have a slight lead. The results of the survey are also of interest with regard to the responses given by different generations. In Germany and the United Kingdom 74 and 61 per cent respectively of interviewees under 29 are in favour of a committee of wise men, whereas in France interviewees over 60 (71 per cent) support the idea.

On the other hand, the political response to the proposals has been mixed. At the Franco-German summit in Meseberg on 10 September 2007, German Chancellor Angela Merkel indicated that she was basically in favour of a committee of wise men.

At the same time she made it quite clear that, whilst questions relating to enlargement were certainly going to be discussed, they would not only be about Turkey.

The President of the EU Commission, José Manuel Barroso, has also welcomed the idea, though he emphasized that it would be wrong to undermine legally binding agreements pertaining to accession negotiations. Nevertheless, it was imperative to continue to think about the EU's political mission and identity.

Finally, representatives of the European Parliament have lashed out at the proposals, which they consider to be a kind of relapse into methods employed in the 1960s and 1970s. They believe that, instead of appointing a committee of wise men, the EU ought to have a new conven-

tion with broadly-based parliamentary and civil society participation. Far-reaching decisions concerning the future of the European Union, the critics believe, should not be reached behind closed doors. It is also noticeable that neither the current Portuguese Presidency nor many of the member states have commented on the French proposals. Many would simply like to ignore them altogether.

II

Important Precursors

In recent European history there have been several examples of **committees of wise men or reflection groups** which were instituted in order to create renewed momentum at critical turning points. Thus in 1956 the Spaak report paved the way for the Treaties of Rome. In 1975 the then Belgian prime minister, Leo Tindemans, adopted a new methodology, compiling his report on the future of the Community after interviewing politicians, academics and interest groups. There was another spate of reports in the 1980s. 1984 saw the publication of Spinelli's draft for a European constitution. The Adonnino report (1985), which was supposed to strengthen European identity, was followed by the Padoa-Schioppa report (1987), which was devoted to economic policy. Finally, there was the Delors report (1989) on economic and monetary union.

Recently, in 1999, there was a noteworthy report on the ramifications of EU enlargement by a committee of wise men which included Jean-Luc Dehaene, Richard von Weizsäcker and Lord Simon of Highbury. Furthermore, two reports which were ex-

plicitly devoted to the EU's Lisbon strategy had political consequences. The Sapir Report (2003), which was compiled at the behest of the Commission, and the Kok Report (2004), which was commissioned by the European Council, led to a revision of the Lisbon strategy.

Not all of the reports published by these high-level strategic councils produced immediate results. However, most of them

The Significance of selected EU Expert Groups			
		Significance	
Year	Report	short-term	long-term
1956	Spaak Report <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draft of an economic and atomic energy community Governmental committee consisting of delegates 	■■■	■■■
1961/62	Fouchet Plans <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Study commission with representatives from the six EEC states Proposals for a political union based on intergovernmental procedures 	■	■■
1970	Werner Plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Five presidents of the EC committees on economic and monetary policy Proposals for a monetary union after ten years based on three-stage plan 	■	■■■
1975	Tindemans Report <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report based on interviews with politicians, academics and interest groups Comprehensive mandate – an attempt to strengthen the Community 	■	■■
1989	Delors Report <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delors wants presidents of central banks instead of finance ministers in this expert group Specific mandate – three-stage plan for economic and monetary union 	■■■	■■■
1999	Dehaene Group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appointed by Prodi, the President of the Commission, who wanted independent views from three experts on the institutional ramifications of enlargement 	■■	■■
2004	Kok Report <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Task force devoted to a mid-term analysis of the Lisbon strategy Suggestions for economic and employment policy reforms 	■■	■■

made a profound impression in the long term and had a lasting influence to European integration. Thus, although it proved impossible to implement the Fouchet plans in 1961/62, they formed the starting point for the Franco-German treaty of friendship. The Werner plan, which as early as 1970 suggested the establishment of a monetary union within ten years on the basis of a three-stage plan, initially went unheeded. However, the Treaty of Maastricht subse-

quently laid the foundations for the European economic and monetary union.

In the past, three positive factors have governed the fate of specialist groups and councils of experts:

- The probability of success or at least the political leverage of committees of wise men increased if there was a likelihood that the target was treaty reform or at least a reform of the fundamental EU guidelines governing matters of content. Furthermore, the proposals had to be courageous and innovative. Even if the Werner plan for a monetary union was not immediately implemented, it resurfaced years later, as did Spinelli's proposal for a European constitution.
- Groups of specialists or experts should not be appointed along political lines, and thus it would be advisable to eschew parity, proportional representation and political parties. A group consisting entirely of diplomats and elected politicians, as, for example, was the case with the Westendorp reflection group in 1985, will probably not come up with proposals which might be relevant for a debate among the general public.

“No proportional representation and no political parties”

- The final report of a group of experts had to go far beyond an analysis and description of the current political situation. Here it would be true to say that less is sometimes more. The general public should to be included in the process in order to encourage policymakers to think about the proposals advanced by the committee of wise men. For this reason there is a need for something which can also be communicated in an easily understandable and concise form. Examples of this are Werner's three-stage plan or subsequently the Delors report.

III

Conditions for success today

Additionally to the experience of previous committees, five challenges currently facing European policymakers should be taken into account if the committee of wise men wishes to be a success.

- First, the heads of state and government should ensure that Nicolas Sarkozy cannot instrumentalize the committee of wise men in order to achieve his political goals. If the European Union wishes to retain its credibility, the question of the geographical boundaries of the EU and in particular the subject of Turkey must not be allowed to dominate the work of the new committee. At the start of the accession talks with Turkey in December 2005 the EU committed itself to an impartial process guided by the Commission. The outcome of the negotiations should decide whether or not Turkey can join the EU, and nothing else. If the committee of wise men were to assume responsibility for the decision on whether or not to admit Turkey, the authority of the Commission as principal negotiator would suffer immeasurably.
- Second, the committee of wise men should concentrate on providing political orientation, even though it would be possible to exert far more political pressure with proposals designed to implement institutional reforms. In the past 15 years the legal basis of the European Union was fundamentally reshaped on three occasions by the treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice. The entry into force of the Reform Treaty would constitute yet another profound change in the institutional architecture of the European Union. However, new debates about institutional reform shortly after the (possible) adoption of the Reform Treaty might weaken the acceptance of the European Union even further, since the necessity of

additional changes after such a long period of reform would be difficult to justify.

- Third, against the background of the ongoing criticism of the EU on account of its democratic deficits, it would be wrong to evade the question of the democratic legitimacy of the committee of wise men. The central innovations of the [Constitutional Treaty](#) drawn up by the European Convention - which are likely to be adopted in the Reform Treaty - particularly aimed to strengthen the democratic life of the European Union. Therefore, when the committee of wise men receives its mandate, this should on no account negate the principle of participation. There must be sufficient opportunities for public debate.

“Why not a non-European in the committee of wise men?”

- Fourth, the committee of wise men should not be dominated by active politicians. Angela Merkel has already come out in favour of appointing personalities “who possess a certain aloofness, a kind of far-sighted vision.” It is conceivable that they might be prominent people in public life such as, for example, intellectuals, academics, artists, businessmen, or sportsmen. However, there is a risk that the whole project might lose credibility on account of the committee’s low-key political profile. The basic idea that the committee of wise men is a strategic instrument for long-term planning would thus be discredited. On the other hand, it would be interesting to include a non-European in the committee of wise men. An unfamiliar view from the outside might help to put an end to the Europeans’ navel gazing.

- Fifth, the committee of wise men must take into account the current reality of European politics. With its 27 member states the European Union will find it very difficult to reconcile the differing interests, goals and targets, and will have to

make substantial compromises. The summit of the EU heads of state and government in June 2007 gave a glimpse of a new style of media-based confrontation that derives from an attempt to defend vested interests and power. There is now little sign of a strategy of sustained compromise among the member states which could give a new impetus to the development of Europe.

IV

New Food for Thought

It is not a foregone conclusion that the committee of wise men will be a success, and it cannot be guaranteed that its work will have a sustained effect. However, it would be wrong to underestimate the extent of what it might possibly achieve.

In recent years it has become apparent that both the member states and the institutions of the European Union are either partly or wholly unable to initiate a debate about a common vision of the EU in 2020 or 2030, and to reach certain conclusions. In the daily business of politics it is clear that the interests of what are now 27 member states diverge considerably. Only by dint of great effort was it possible to reach a fragile compromise in the shape of the Reform Treaty, which is totally uncertain to enter into force in this form.

When the committee of wise men meets, it should aim to provide food for thought and specific topics for a broadly-based debate among politicians and society throughout the length and breadth of Europe. The following issues are particularly important:

- What are the political and strategic challenges which the European Union will have to meet in the years ahead, both within the Union and with regard to its external relations with other states and global regions?
- What will be the political and economic significance of the European Union in the

global context, and how can it attain or preserve this significance?

- In the light of the diverging ideas and predilections of the member states, how can further steps towards greater integration be implemented by states in favour of integration? What differentiation strategies can the European Union develop?
- How can the decision-making structures and institutions of the European Union be politicized so that they will be of interest to EU citizens and gain democratic legitimacy? What are the roles of the media, the political parties, and other civil society actors?

“Initiate the long-overdue debate”

A committee of wise men which consists of independent members and mirrors the diversity of opinion within the Union will be in a much better position to deal with such questions than a committee of elected politicians. The restriction to strategic questions will make it difficult to get bogged down in details and will prevent the kind of failure brought about by the intrusion of the business of daily politics. In such a best-case scenario the committee of wise men can initiate the long-overdue debate about the ways and means the European Union might employ to meet the challenges with which it will be confronted whether it likes it or not, for example, the economic rise of the Asian region, especially of China and India, the security policy risks of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, the provision of energy supplies at affordable prices, tackling climate change and its effects, global migration, and population growth. If the committee of wise men manages to convince the member states of the necessity for joint European action in strategically important areas, then much will have been achieved.

V

Strengthening the European public debate

As past events have demonstrated, councils of experts and specialist commissions have often been in a position to provide important and far-reaching ideas for the subsequent development of the European Union. A committee of wise men would find it possible to do things which are simply out of the question in the narrower political decision-making sphere. For this reason much speaks in favour of establishing such a committee.

On the other hand, this council is being convened in “turbulent” times in which the Reform Treaty is being ratified in the member states and preparations are under way for a new European Parliament and a new Commission. In this context a committee of wise men could easily be allowed to recede into the background. Furthermore, it would to some extent run counter to the fundamentally new idea of greater participation by both civil society and the democratically elected members of the European Parliament and the national parliaments in the decision-making processes that pertain to the future of the EU.

However, if this committee of wise men is convened, it should be given a chance to show what it can do. For this to happen certain preconditions must be complied with. In order to work in an effective and efficient manner, the committee needs a clear mandate. Moreover, the member states and EU institutions must be willing to take note of its recommendations. Yet what the committee has to say will only become widely known if its work initiates a broadly-based public debate about the ways and means of European integration. The election campaign for the European polls in 2009 could constitute the platform for a debate about the future of Europe that takes its bearings from the report of the committee of wise men.

Responsible

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