

# The British Presidency of the European Union and the Mediterranean in 2005

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At the end of June 2005, Britain took over the presidency of the European Union for the last six months of the year. The European political atmosphere was already morose – France and Netherlands had both organised referenda on the proposed European constitution which the populations of both countries had rejected, thus effectively killing the constitution off, at least as proposed. Tensions were already rising over the start of Accession talks with Turkey in October 2005, with France and Austria, in particular, voicing reservations about the whole project. And looming in the distance was the problem of the European budget for the period from 2007-to-2013, in the wake of the collapse of Luxembourg's attempt to settle the matter earlier in the year.

The new presidency opened well with a stirring speech from the British premier, Tony Blair, to the European parliament. He called on Europe to actively accept the embrace of globalisation and reconnect with its citizens, promising that the British presidency would itself actively engage with the European project. The only real achievement, however, was agreement, at the end of the presidency, over the 2007-to-2013 indicative budget; the Financial Perspective. Britain's rebate was reduced by €10.5 billion, rather than the €8 billion first proposed by London, and the budget itself was set at 1.045 per cent of Europe's GNP, rather than the original British proposal of 1.03 per cent –

the Commission had sought 1.24 per cent! Britain's contributions to the budget, in short, will rise by 63 per cent but France's victory over the rebate has cost it a 116 per cent increase in its contributions!

In short, as is usually the case with British engagement with Europe, the publicity glitter turned out to be far more impressive than the substance itself. Despite the new Strategy for Africa and the Consensus on Development, or the successful negotiation of the 2007-2013 Financial Perspective, the presidency has turned out to be long on rhetoric and short on achievement. This has proved to be particularly the case as far as the Mediterranean is concerned, where Britain had to pilot the 2005 Barcelona ten-year review conference in November at a particularly difficult moment for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, just over a month after the crisis over Turkey's planned accession to the Union. Although the increased Financial Perspectives might imply an increase in funding for the Partnership, from 2007 onwards it will be melded with the new European Neighbourhood instrument and its future is unclear (The funding available over the Financial Perspectives period of 2007-to-2013 will be €14.929 billion but will have to cover the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership States and ten others in the East and the Caucasus [Smith K.: 2005]).

## **British Attitudes towards Mediterranean Policy**

Quite apart from the British management of the presidency – and by September 2005, the complaints in Eu-

rope about British lack of interest, administrative incompetence, and unrealistic ambitions were audible even in London (A. Browne and C. Bremner: 2005) – Britain has long manifested a sense of remoteness about Europe's Mediterranean project. In part this stems from the growing Euro-scepticism that has increasingly pervaded the country since Mrs Thatcher's notorious Bruges speech in September 1988. Euro-scepticism, however, is not found only on the rightwing of politics but has also been reflected inside the ruling Labour Party ever since 1997 when it came to power.

Although Mr Blair put himself forward as the politician to bring Britain back into the leadership of Europe, alongside Germany and France, his apparent Euro-enthusiasm has always been hampered by the scepticism of the chancellor-of-the-exchequer and rival for leadership, Gordon Brown. Mr Brown was particularly sceptical over the single European currency, the euro, and invented his famous five tests to avoid British membership of it. Mr Blair has never challenged this view despite his occasional attempts to popularise the single European currency.

In any case, he himself has always been drawn towards a closer alliance across the Atlantic, although he tried to sweeten the implicit rejection of Europe by claiming that he wished to be a bridge between the world's two great economic powers. It was a contradiction which reached its height in 2003 when Britain was instrumental in splitting Europe over the issue of Iraq. Even though most Britons did not support governmental policy, more atavistic sentiments did resent German and French attitudes over the issue, looking towards the pro-

American sentiments of rightwing governments in Europe and of the governments of the new Accession countries instead.

Furthermore, as far as the Mediterranean itself is concerned, there has always been ambivalence over the Union's policy. Over a decade ago, it was British resistance at the Edinburgh summit in 1992 which restricted the Delors II financial package for the 1992-1999 period to 1.24 per cent of European GNP. This later ensured, again with British support, that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership itself was only funded at €4.85 billion under the MEDA-1 programme, despite the Commission's desire for more generous financial support. In addition, there has also been a feeling in professional diplomatic circles that the Partnership was a "good idea" but uncertainty as to whether "its time had come", as one senior Foreign Office official once remarked.

The British attitude is, perhaps, not uncommon amongst the more northerly members of the Union. Indeed, despite its long colonial association with the Mediterranean and its continuing presence in Gibraltar and Cyprus, Britons have progressively marginalised the region in their strategic calculations, looking instead westwards. It is only very recently that this attitude has begun to change, as migrants from the Mediterranean region begin to make their mark against the migrant majority from the Caribbean and South Asia and as terrorism has risen up the political agenda. Otherwise only commerce had seemed to be of interest although as Britain becomes a net energy importer from 2005 on, Algerian gas and Libyan oil will focus minds anew on the region.

### **Mediterranean Initiatives**

It is against this background that the role of the British presidency in the Mediterranean should be seen. Interestingly enough, unlike the previous British presidency where its Mediterranean initiatives were marked by efficiency and commitment, as outlined above, on this occasion the Blair government came in for considerable criticism over its

commitment and organisational skills. The fault appears to lie in Downing Street, not at the Foreign and Commonwealth office, where Ambassador Frances Guy was highly effective in handling the diplomatic dimension and an assiduous participant in conferences and events about the region, attending the EuroMeSCo conference in Rabat in May 2005 and organising a presidency seminar in London at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in September.

Nonetheless, the British presidency did undertake some important initiatives affecting the Mediterranean. It piloted the difficult initiation of Accession negotiations with Turkey, alongside similar negotiations with Croatia. It also opened stabilisation and association agreement negotiations with Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia and Montenegro, as well as ensuring that Macedonia was granted candidate status. It also took the lead in negotiations resulting in control of illegal migration and migration flows.

The presidency also oversaw the provision of a European mission (the EU Border Assistance Mission) to monitor the Rafah crossing-point between the Gaza Strip and Egypt in the wake of the unilateral Israeli withdrawal there in August. It also ensured support to the Palestinian Authority with a Commission aid package worth €280 million. In Iraq, the presidency promoted EU support for the referendum and December elections, together with training provision for the new security forces and, in Iran, the presidency oversaw the activities of the troika negotiating over Iranian plans for nuclear power.

Other initiatives, such as the new EU-African strategy decided at Gleneagles in July 2005, may also have a marginal significance for the Mediterranean. They also include the new terrorism strategy promoted by London and proposed measures to control smuggling – of both people and drugs. The presidency also proposed discussions with North African states on these issues and on terrorism for 2006 (FCO: 2006).

### **The November Conference**

The major initiative on the Mediterranean

was, of course the first-ever Euro-Med Summit, held in Barcelona on 27th-28th November 2005. Despite the gloss placed on the event in the official report (FCO: 2006), it was also the presidency event which caused the greatest disappointment amongst those involved. The first disappointment was the question of attendance. In place of the full complement of the heads of state from the twenty-five European Union states and the ten Mediterranean Partner states, many were missing, particularly from the South Mediterranean. They included the presidents of Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, as well as the kings of Morocco and Jordan. In fact, given the absence of Israeli premier Ariel Sharon, the South was represented by only two leaders from Palestine and Turkey! Spain, the host country, was displeased, blaming the presidency for the poor showing.

The substance of the summit was described as "lacklustre" and the atmosphere as "fractious" after lengthy discussions and disagreements over one of the primary items on the agenda, a proposed agreement which the presidency had proposed as part of a joint action against terrorism. The final document was only agreed after a dispute over terrorism and national liberation was resolved by omitting all reference to both issues – the Arab world had insisted on a distinction between the two whilst European states insisted that national liberation could never be used as a justification for terrorism. There was a similar dispute over the presidency's proposed "Common Vision" – a way forward towards Middle East peace and greater commitment to democracy and economic reform – because of differences over the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

Southern resentment over the Union's concept of negative conditionality as enshrined inside the Association Agreements broke out when the Algerian foreign minister objected to the linkage between aid and reform. Nonetheless, the delegates were able to finally agree on the modified anti-terrorism code and on a five-year work programme which would extend the partnership into the fields of collective security and illegal migration. There was, however, considerable irritation that a lack of proper

preparation had meant that the conference, although reaffirming the principles of the Barcelona Declaration, had neither really addressed the ways in which the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership had fallen short of its goals nor been able to agree on an effective project for the future. It was hardly an auspicious end to a presidency premised on Britain's promised return to centre-stage on the European arena!

## References

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