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Breaking out from the old pattern

A Green vision for the new EU Commission

This time it's different. The traditional "Europe at a crossroad" has morphed into a cliff-hanger situation. For the European Union, the next five years have become a matter of make-or-break choices.

Shaken by the violent crisis of the past years, European public opinion has traded traditional disinterest towards Europe for a more defiant attitude. "Brussels" has become the easy target of national grievances, even when the problem is national. With an EU too 'foreign' to be understood and too complex to be liked, a significant majority of European citizens do not think the EU's involvement in their lives is significant enough for them to participate in elections, while a small but equally significant minority believe the EU harms their interests enough to warrant voting for vocal anti-EU parties. Persistent abstention, rising extreme-right, rampant populist mood: as time goes by, the EU is no longer perceived as the guardian of shared peace and prosperity. Corporate greed, government complicity and the blatant political failure of the past Barroso Commissions have set our Europe on the wrong path, that of business interests and undemocratic practices. Meanwhile, the Mediterranean shores are a permanent setting for human tragedy and social crisis, global stability is under threat and the climate crisis increasingly demands immediate and drastic action.

Fuelled by populist and extremist rhetoric, the cumulative effects of the crises have unfortunately led citizens to consider the political integration of Europe as a threat to both their welfare and sense of identity. If the outcome of the last European elections can be boiled down to one clear and simple message from the electorate, it is that things cannot remain as they are.

The Greens always considered that the challenges of this century demand common European solutions above solely national level. We believe that for the next President of the Commission, of utmost urgency will be to mend the broken promise of an area of solidarity and shared wealth. As next POTEC, Mr Juncker will have to spare no effort in order to bridge the currently widening gaps between Northerners and Southerners, Easterners and Westerners, net payers and net beneficiaries, core and periphery, rich and poor; and bring Europeans back together as a whole. The narrative of our European project as a whole needs renewal. Any temptation to pursue the socially destructive austerity policies embodied by the infamous Troika and to bring the EU back to the old policies that led to the crisis must be fought and defeated. Neither "status quo" nor "business as usual" can be considered as options.

This fundamental change starts with democracy. Strengthening European democracy is vital, and it means first and foremost changing political practices at EU level. It means a POTEC claiming back independence from the bigger states and vested corporate interests. It means a genuinely collegial, transparent and gender-balanced Commission. We are well aware that the Commission is in no way a European government, and that subsidiarity is a pillar of European democracy. But lately, the Commission has clearly been functioning more like a true political body, especially under the pressure of the crisis; and thus we expect a political Commission to be actually accountable, more lobby-resistant, accepting of full democratic scrutiny and actively engaging the European citizens in the debate over their EU and its future.

A first concrete gesture would be to bring the Troika and economic governance bodies under strict democratic control. Austerity was meant to “save the Euro-zone” – but it might cost us Europe. Beyond this pressing and evident change in the practices, Europe needs investment, concrete and massive, in a sustainable economy, to reverse the devastating effects of the austerity policies brutally imposed on entire societies without any regard to their human costs. It is time to revitalize Europe’s economies through a transition to a green economy; policies that preserve the planet and our environment, health and food represent huge opportunities and employment prospects.

Our common European project cannot survive one-sided economic governance and policies, which above all drives people into poverty and threatens social justice. Cooperation is the answer, not enhanced competition, particularly between member states and their social and fiscal systems. Better, fairer, greener and convergent taxation policies, combined with a drastic curb on tax-fraud and tax-evasion would contribute to the means for such investments; and signal that we’re collectively ready to give substance to “Social Europe”.

And finally, we expect the EU to keep its promise of openness and freedom. Over the past decade, national governments have grown increasingly bolder in their handling of security matters. Thanks to Edward Snowden, everyone knows now that globalised technology and state security systems have become so intertwined that basic democratic rules and the freedoms of European citizens are at stake. In the name of “peace and security”, many fundamental freedoms are often threatened at home and disregarded in Europe’s foreign policy.

In addition, times of deep economic crisis and growing political extremism increase the vulnerability of minority groups, like Roma people across the EU. First under threat is freedom of movement, but many other rights are questioned, either via the external walls of ‘Fortress Europe’ or via the internal walls of xenophobic bigotry and the lure of authoritarian rule.

The European Union is made up of freedom, dignity and solidarity. These values must be maintained consistently and coherently, in all policy fields within or beyond the borders of the EU. If we forget its fundamentals, the European project might collapse, undermined by national egoisms, populist resentment and social injustice. Mr Juncker, there will be no second chance. We must rebuild the house, with better plans this time, breaking out from the old patterns.

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