# Montesquieu Prinsjeslezing 2017

# Text lecture Paul Scheffer

## ****United in diversity - from polarisation to pacification****

It is a real pleasure, an honour, to share with you some thoughts about the state of this union.

I have been listening to Jean-Claude Juncker very carefully, but my state of this union would certainly begin with Brexit. The momentous decision of the United Kingdom on June 23 of last year to leave the European Union. If only because more than a year after the event, the first serious research to what has happened was published. Especially the book of Harold Clarke and Matthew Goodwin, 'Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union'. It is based on extensive investigation into members of UKIP, the motives of voters at large.

Just one finding to start with. The vote was decided by a relatively small margin. Roughly 52% for leave, 48% for remain. But they calculated that in no less than 64% of constituencies, if you would use the British electoral system there were leave majorities. They also showed that one year after the Brexit, there is still the same majority among the public for leaving the EU, despite the lack of organisation of the government. But more importantly, their research shows what the main reasons were for Brexit. They summarized their findings in the following way: "Although arguments about how exiting the EU would help to re-establish national sovereignty and invigorate democracy, which were prominent themes in the leave campaign, our analysis indicates that strong public concern over the large number of migrants entering the country, was front and centre to the leave campaign securing victory."

Of course, the public awareness of migration reflected real changes in the migration pattern in the UK. 2015 was a record year of migration with net migration of 336.000 people. And what might be surprising (about this research) is that they (the researchers) had for the first time access to the members of UKIP. They were allowed to interview them and to interrogate them, and they did so in large scale. Yet, the attitude of the rank and file when it comes to migration, were representative of the public at large. UKIP was not an outlier, it was the party that represented the overall sentiment in Britain vis-à-vis migration.

The conclusion: “Our survey data clearly shows that UKIPers' feeling towards various minorities, are virtually identical to those expressed by a representative national sample of the general public”. So that is something to chew on, because it reveals perhaps that UKIP was in that way more mainstream than Conservatives' and Labours' view.

Even more important, this research shows that the economic argument was won by Cameron. In the leave campaign, most people accepted, also those interviewed after Brexit, the argument that in terms of economic losses and benefits, Brexit would bring considerable costs with it. That appeared not to have been the most urgent question on their minds. The analysis suggests that judgements about migration exert stronger effects than the reaction of the economic conditions. It's not the economy, stupid. Or certainly, it is not only the economy. And everybody who tries to reflect on what societies are, should understand that a society is always more than a set of material conditions. It is also a symbolic order, an imagined community. And that is why questions of immigration are felt so passionate by large majorities of the electorate.

Finally, perhaps one of the most interesting lessons of the Brexit campaign, is that the remain campaign was in the eyes of the general public, again interviewed in a very sophisticated way after Brexit, that their view of the remain campaign was the most negative one. It was later labelled as Project Fear, basically repeating what Cameron and others said, that Brexit would cause a severe recession on a short notice and all that. It was seen as more negative than the hopeful slogans, although that hope might be described as rather fanciful, but nevertheless were seen as a more hopeful argument for global Britain, mending its own affairs in a wider world. That is a lesson to learn, that hope (…) was on the side of leave in this campaign, while experience and mobilizing fear was on the side of remain. And when people argue that populism is all about fear, they should contemplate for a moment that at least during this Brexit campaign, fear was mobilised on all sides, and definitely on the remain side in the eyes of the wider public.

My first conclusion is that the incapacity to come up with an immigration policy in the EU vis-à-vis the migration from outside the EU, but also vis-à-vis migrants from inside the union, was what decided Brexit in the end.

Let it be entirely clear, without the unresolved migration question, Brexit would not have happened and Britain would still be a member of the EU.

Britain is certainly in its attitudes to migration, if you look at the Europe Social Survey and other research being done about attitudes in Europe, Britain is certainly not an outlier among the 28 nations of the EU. On the contrary, it occupies a position somewhere in the middle. Between on the one hand there is Germany and Sweden, being most open to immigration, and Hungary and Poland on the other hand. Take back control. Migration is the most visible aspect of globalisation, and if it is deemed to be out of control, I think it undermines space for welcoming newcomers, and it definitely was the deciding factor in Brexit.

My second observation is that Brexit fits in a pattern that could be described as a failed convergence in the recent history of European integration. The union, and it was already referred to in the opening statement, is an experiment, and in many ways it was a successful experiment in pacification. It is built on the expectation that continued cooperation and negotiation, a common legal and regulatory framework, would gradually lead to forms of convergence economically, but also culturally and socially. Convergence, by the way, not towards an undefined middle ground, but basically towards the West-European standard. Of course, the question is whether this is a realistic expectation, and whether this convergence is happening or whether we see divergence. When we concentrate on two big initiatives that were introduced after the end of the Cold War, abolishing national currencies and abolishing national borders - Schengen, which was of course a momentous decision (…), has these led to more convergence or more divergence and conflict in Europe?

Let us briefly look at the euro. We all know that it was primarily motivated by political considerations. More specifically, it was the price that Germany had to pay for reunification. It was seen at the time, which was very optimistic and full of economic growth (…), as a way to prevent Germany to become too powerful in Europe, which of course had the unintended consequence that Germany is now in a more central positions than ever, and thereby also in a more vulnerable position than ever before. I think few people would dismiss the hard conclusion Joseph Stiglitz, the famous economist, made in his book about the euro. "The euro has failed to achieve either of its two principal goals of prosperity and political integration. These goals are now more distant than they were before the creation of the eurozone. The eurozone’s performance on all accounts has been worse than those countries in Europe that do not belong to the eurozone, and worse than the United States. By 2015, non-eurozone Europe had a GDP of 8.1% higher than in 2007, in comparison to the 0.6% increase within the eurozone."

Of course, you can say that after a lost decade, but a decade is really lost if it is not going to be recovered. And all those young people who are unemployed, are not easily going to find a way into the labour market again. There is really something lost because the price of the euro was indeed very high. But after this lost decade, you can say that we are returning to the path of growth. We will see how stable it is. But most important, the promise of convergence has until this moment not materialised in the halfway house that the euro still is. On the contrary, we have seen a growing divergence with all the political consequences. The euro has created a Europe with more resentment between the north and the south than before. Once more, the conclusion of the Stiglitz analysis: "The most disturbing aspect of the eurozone's divergence is that some countries, most notably Germany, have increasingly become predator countries, some debtors. This creates a divergence in economic interests and perspectives."

The other great symbol of post-1989 Europe, abolishing internal borders, has also not created the convergence that was hoped for. It was a courageous and civilized idea, originated in 1985 and effective after 1995, also in the optimistic period after the end of the Cold War when questions of territory, borders and security appeared to have evaporated with the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact. Of course, 25 years later, we awake in a very different world where Europe is surrounded by violent conflict in the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, and North Africa. With all the refugee and migration movement that result from it.

Open societies, we now discover, cannot develop without borders in an illiberal environment. Authoritarian leaders like Erdogan, Assad, Putin, and Al-Sisi have emerged. These borders need not to be national. They can be European. But then the European Union should develop its own strategy of protection, its own awareness that after abolishing the internal border we now share an external border. Not only the investment in Frontex, which has been a rather marginal affair.

It has been an historic mistake to abolish national borders without understanding that Europe by definition has to be a common area of security and protection. Just as it has been an historic mistake to create the euro the way it was created.

My second conclusion is that the promise of convergence has not materialised when it comes to the two major initiatives in post-Cold War Europe. The end of the national currencies has created a more divided Europe among the lines of north versus south, the end of national borders has contributed to a more divided Europe between east and west. This state of affairs is not a fatality, but we should question the rationality of these initiatives, and at least review the period of the 90's that could be characterized in hindsight as overly optimistic and certainly quite naive when it comes to economic and security prospects. Europe has not converged to West-European standards, and it is not likely that it will do so in the upcoming decade.

Third observation. How then should we understand the rise of populism against this background of two historic mistakes? Populism is definitely not a European phenomenon. But it should tell us that in the Anglo-Saxon world it first gained a majority, and not in continental Europe. I can remember speaking about all these questions quite often in Britain, or giving speeches in the United States, and then I was always met with a sort of condescending attitude. As if we see all demons come back on the European continent, but we are immunized against all that. We are immigration societies, we are open and strong bears of globalisation. Well, the reality now is a bit more stubborn and complicated.

The last elections in May 2014 to the European Parliament are a pointing case. 30 percent to Eurosceptic parties. True, you could argue, 70 percent still to parties that have a more benign view of Europe. I want to challenge the overly optimistic and also deeply problematic view that I heard at an international conference, the Bilderberg conference, shortly after these elections. The European Commissioner there said, while 30 percent makes some noise, 70 percent continues to make the laws. I thought it was deeply disturbing because of course before Brexit, before Trump, how could you possibly know that 30 percent will always remain a minority? And by the way, haven't we learned that in democracies it is all about listening also to the voice of minorities?

So let's look at the 30 percent. The bewildering diversity from UKIP, Front National, from FPÖ to SYRIZA, from Jobbik to the movement of Grillo. All are summarized under anti-establishment or populist. What I like to suggest is that these parties in varying degrees are a genuine expression of discontent. They are part of a self-correcting mechanism of a living democracy. For sure, there are sometimes xenophobic sentiments to be heard. But these populist parties reveal and represent a social and cultural divide in our societies that we should take seriously.

For lack of better words we refer to such movements as populist, but it would be far better to describe them as protectionist. If there has been one resounding cry in Europe over the last few years it has been a call for protection.

The first aspect of this populism is what you could describe as social protectionism. Historically more part of the left wing tradition in politics. The fear that the welfare state is being dismantled by new liberal policies that reduce unemployment and put the middle class under pressure. We see this mainly in Southern Europe where parties like SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain, use well founded arguments to resist a straight jacket of austerity measures that aren't necessary to save the Euro.

It is also a matter of cultural protectionism. Historically more part of the right wing tradition in politics. The idea that national identities are being undermined in a borderless world. We counter these themes particularly in the north of Europe, where parties such as the Danish People's Party and the Dutch Freedom Party have gained popularity. These parties resist immigration, which is partly the consequence of free movement of people within Europe. They too have arguments, although many of them quite exaggerated, bordering the hysterical when it’s about the Islamisation of Europe. As we speak today two attacks, one in London, one in Paris again.

Gilles de Kerchhove, who was responsible for counterterrorism in the European Union, speaks about 50 000 jihadists being part of our society. This is of course a nightmare for all security services. We tend to think that is the new normal, now and then an attack, but I am sure that something is completely unhinged about all this in our public sphere.

Political spectrum is splitting along a new fold line: internationalism versus protectionism. Should this fold line divide politics in the long term and the union as it functions today is reinforcing this new dividing line in Europe, then there is a real risk that a majority of voters will ultimately come together around a illiberal idea of national unity and national identity.

Protectionism in politics is a national expression of a society in which a majority of citizens are not particularly mobile. In my view, populism understood as protectionism, reveals something more profound about the fact that a majority of citizens is in terms of employment, in terms of marriage, in terms of identification, far more than in terms of geography, confined than people on the move.

Anyone who wishes to understand the Front National in France should begin with a simple statistic that I saw in Le Monde. 7 out of 10 French people still live in the region where they were born. So, we are far less mobile than you think. That is why these new parties that express forms of social and cultural protectionism are not going to go away easily.

My third conclusion is that it means that populism is a form of protectionism, we understand the rational core of this movement in politics. There are certainly irrational motives that apply to populism. As we saw during the Brexit campaign, mobilizing fear is happening at least on all sides, and during the Brexit campaign certainly more on the remain side than on the leave side. Who would want to maintain that the euro, in its present form, was a rational economic idea?

In short, if those with a liberal inclination do not understand that the core of this protectionism is rational and should be answered, then we will witness the emerging of illiberal minorities in our societies.

My last remark is where should we go from here? The tragedy of the European Union according to former member of the European Parliament Daniel Cohn-Bendit, is that many people feel that it offers them no protection.

Herman van Rompuy referred to this, when accepting the Charlemagne prize. "Europe, the great opener of opportunities is now perceived by many as an unwelcome 'intruder'. The friend of freedom and space is seen as a threat to protection and place. We need to restore the balance. It is essential for the union to be on the side of protection."

The union, in my words, needs to start to see itself more as a protective union, allowing Europe to pursue its own social project in a growing world disorder. Understanding this need for protection means that in some areas Europe should limit itself. If you want, less Europe.

The big question being there is: is the euro viable? I think it is a profound question and I am not going to answer it today. We are really struggling with answering this question. If only because what I see is needed is a transfer union, which will be fiercely resisted in parts of the eurozone, and it will not help the south to reform. I was speaking to the president of the Dutch bank and we were talking about Italy. I said that Italy was a very rich country if it only had an effective taxing system. Well, we've been already discussing an effective taxing system about 150 years...

So the question is what sort of reform, given that Europe is not easily convergent to the Protestant North-West European norm, what form of real convergence can we imagine and what is the price we pay to maintain the euro.

This is a big open question, but I want to concentrate to something else. Because if you want a Europe that protects, you also need more Europe. I don't want to be caught into stereotype arguments of less or more Europe. Because that doesn't really answer those questions that are put forward by populist movements in our democracy. If these questions are understood as questions about protection then we need more Europe in such areas, because the national states cannot answer these questions of protectionism on their own.

I began with Brexit. It could have been avoided if the Union would have had a consistent policy with regard to migration. From outside, but also from within the Union. Let me be clear: there are many people who think that the refugee crisis of 2015 was an incident. But it must be entirely clear that the migration and refugee crisis will haunt us in the common decades. Demographic developments are just one example: sub-Sahara Africa population will more than double in the next 30 years. 1.2 billion people more than is now the case in one of the poorest areas in the world.

Climate change will provoke massive upheaval. Most estimates, although they are very unreliable, talk about 200 million migrants at least. That is the total number of international migrants we have today.

The global inequality between the north and the south, the political crises and the civil wars that we see in many areas around us, and last but not least chain migration - the fact that migration and diasporas contribute as a multiplier to migration. All these facts together means that it is not an overestimation to say that the migration and refugee crisis will be with us in the coming decades.

My final conclusion is that the union cannot be a community of values unless it becomes a community of security. It should take the need for protection very seriously. If Europe is not an answer to the problematic aspects of globalisation, it is reinforcing the idea that globalisation means that the world is out of control, and you hear this repeated over and over again. For example when it comes to migration, migrants will come. Either legally of illegally. Borders have no meaning in the 21st century. Europe is unable to come with an alternative to the idea that globalisation is more or less a state of national affairs and that the problematic aspect of globalisation cannot be answered, then the liberal imagination will lose against the illiberal answers that will draw borders, that will create a sense of protection.

Europe should come up with a far more engaged way of dealing with illegal migration. The combination of prevention and repression, like with all forms of illegality. But somehow we live with a moral confusion when it comes to illegal migration. We have difficulty in seeing that illegality is a form of illegality. That somehow morally illegal migration is not entirely illegal. Well, it is.

If we want to create space to legal migration, we should fight against illegal migration in a much more engaged way than we do today. With employer sanctions, with border control, with agreements with the countries of origin, etcetera. Yes, it is also about forms of prevention, but those are in the long run in forms of development, different trade relations. We can come with a whole catalogue of measures. What is needed is a far more engaged way of dealing with illegal migration, and I am not at all convinced that it cannot be done. Blair last proposed in the mid-90s already to do far more about illegal migration, and this idea was subverted by France and Germany. They didn't want to do much more.

A more strict approach to illegal migration will help ease tensions surrounding migration, as much as I am convinced that finding a scope that limits our humanitarian obligation towards refugees will help. Now, the moral middle ground is destroyed by those advocating open borders, the idea that border control is something that is inhuman, and by those who are in favour of closed borders. We need to rediscover the moral middle ground. We cannot say that the needs of those inside of our borders are always more important than the needs of those outside of our borders, but we cannot say the opposite as well. That the needs of those outside our borders always have preference over the needs of those inside our borders. It’s a real moral dilemma.

The European Union should do more in these areas, just as an example to of what Europe should become. It should be a sphere not only of freedom, but also of protection. (...) Our great worry today, is that the tensions in Europe are preventing from developing in that direction. Then I am sure that we will see a renationalisation of borders, with all the economic consequences that it will bring.

The same is true for internal migration in the European Union. The monetary affairs have created escape routes for countries with specific problems. Why not create those exemptions for countries that have specific problems with internal migration in the union? A sensible compromise is needed. We should have given Britain more space to formulate its own migration policy, then Britain would still be inside of this union. Why is it needed? Not only as a gesture to the Britain, because the same questions are asked throughout Europe. In creating better conditions in terms of upholding the social contract, not allowing migrants to work under different conditions, what Asscher and others are trying to achieve. Macron has adopted this also. It is part of the solution. When migration in Europe becomes a problem in a specific country, it should have a possibility to react in a flexible way.

Because the inflexibility in which Europe reacted to British demands has led to the Brexit.

The price of Brexit is simply far too high. I hope that Europe will develop in terms that I described. That it will be a real attempt of convergence, at least in terms of creating a zone of security and protection. What is going on is distantly not a fatality. It is a distinct possibility that Europe will be able to find a cohesion, a political consensus, to come up with these sort of answers.

That is why I begin my state of this union with Brexit and I will end it there as well.

# Text lecture Caroline de Gruyter

## ****United by diversity - from polarisation to pacification****

It is a great pleasure for me to be speaking to you about this year’s ‘Prinsjes theme’: polarisation and pacification.

For me, this goes straight into the heart of the European matter. Polarisation and pacification tend to go together. Europe is my field of work. The European Union is a peace project. It was, and it still is to this day, an attempt to pacify European nation states with clashing interests and ambitions. Those clashes have, as we all know, in the past repeatedly gotten out of hand militarily. I often hear people complain these days about the EU. “See,” they say: “there is the EU and still the North is disagreeing with the South! Brussels is at loggerheads with the Visegrad states! The French have different plans for the euro than the Germans!” and so on. Yes, that’s right. Day in, day out, European countries clash with one another on a wide range of different subjects. They have different interests, different hangups, different ambitions, different industries and different taboos - and so they will always clash. They used to fight this out with guns. Now they fight with words. I think that’s sheer progress.

I have spent 10 years describing these verbal fights in Brussels. Not just about refugees or different visions of the euro. Do you know how long they fought about the so-called ‘breakfast regulation’? In other words, a precise definition of what can be labelled ‘muesli’, and how much sugar or nuts 100 grams of this is allowed to contain? So that on the internal market every producer can compete with others from other member states freely and fairly? Well, it took them years. Several member states produce sugar. Others have raisins, or big cereal companies. Diplomats fought over this like street cats – about two grams of this, or half a gram of that. Another example? It took them 15 years to agree on a European patent. They all want this patent: you can file a request in one country and have it recognized automatically in all EU member states, instead of applying in each country again, each time in different languages and for whopping fees. Everybody agreed: this would be great progress. But still it took them a generation to conclude it, and not everybody is on board - because of a dispute about language, the language in which the patent is eventually translated. Some countries can’t accept that their language will not be used.

I can go on and on about this. I won’t, don’t worry. My point is here that conflict, polarisation, is a given in Europe – even after so many years of peace on the continent. That is why we still need some kind of mechanism, a structure, to contain these forces. To make sure the conflicts are fought out verbally, with words, and not with guns again. Some people assume European nation states can live happily together without this structure. They think there can’t be war again. I think this is an illusion, dangerous and naive. I have seen the cunning games in Brussels. I have smelled the adrenalin, the raw emotions and the sarcasm of the foot soldiers in the corridors. They were smartly dressed, in suits and ties – but still they are foot soldiers, on a mission to defeat another country’s foot soldiers on behalf of their country’s banks, coal industry, or chicken farms. And I cannot think of a better raison d’être of the EU than this. Not to suppress these emotions. But to contain them and modify them.

At school I used to learn that Europe is all about trade. About economic cooperation with our neighbours. Oh yes, and some of us share a common currency, too. It is high time we start teaching our children that the EU is a political project. That it is basically all about, yes: polarisation and pacification. To this very day.

If you want to start to understand Europe’s troubles, it is essential to know what the European Union is about and how it functions. You have to know what it is, and what it is not. As long as our school books give priority to NATO and transatlantic relations, treating European cooperation as an economic afterthought, Dutch citizens will never understand what our country is doing in the heart of the EU, why we are in Schengen and the euro, and why we are participating in every single project that the EU is undertaking. It’s politics, stupid.

Nowadays I think the biggest challenge is not what to do with the ‘new’ member states. It is not the euro, or even the economy, which anyway seems to be picking up. And it is not Brexit, either. I think the biggest challenge is to come to terms with globalization.

Let me take you back a couple of years. I am sitting on the couch with my father. We are watching television. It is election time. He supports the rightwing liberals, and like my classmates I had pinned a broken gun on my jumper – maybe just to annoy him. Anyway, we are on opposite sides and we have a real fight. In those days there was a big difference between left and right. Socially, and economically they advocated totally different policies for the country. It made a huge difference, whether the VVD or PvdA – the right or the left – won the elections. One would lower taxes and diminish social spending. The other would do the exact oppositie. This was the same in all European countries. Sovereignty had real meaning in those days.

Nowadays, this difference has almost evaporated. Tony Blair, a Labour man, has liberalized and privatised more than Tory Margaret Thatcher. The Greeks wanted different policies and voted for Syriza. But Syriza continues the policies of the previous conservative government. Greece is in the eurozone. It voted for this itself. ‘Different policies’ would have meant an exit from the euro zone and guaranteed pariah status for the next decade or two. Poland wanted to change its pension system a few years ago. The plan was killed in the end. Not by the opposition in Poland (though they tried), but by Pimco in the US - the financiers. Pimco said: “If you go ahead with this plan, we’ll withdraw.”

By globalizing we have taken the economy out of national politics. We’ve taken it to a higher level. This means that you can still talk about it, or fight about it, in the parliament, or in cafés or, like my father and me, on the couch. But these discussions have only limited impact on policies now. People vote Syriza, and get different ministers not different policies. So they start complaining that democracy doesn’t work. Whoever they vote for, it doesn’t have real impact. They feel, rightly, that they’ve lost control somehow. Power has slipped away. They ask: what is democracy worth? It makes them frustrated and angry. Some turn their back on politics, others start hating all politicians and vote them down whenever they can.

The main battle that citizens in Europe are waging, centres on this.

During the euro crisis I once witnessed an extraordinary discussion in the offices of a think tank in Brussels. It was lunch time. 20 people or so were sitting around a large oval table with sandwiches. We were looking out over the Parc Cinquantenaire. I remember the autumn wind chasing the last leaves from the trees. Suddenly the door opened. 4 young men in jeans entered. They were Indignados, young activists who had been camping out for several weeks in the park, protesting against neoliberal policies and the multibillion bailout of banks in Europe and America. “This is not the society that we want,” one of them said. He was a young man from the Sorbonne. Like the others, he was eloquent, well educated, multilingual, polite, and serious. Nice guys.

I will never forget this session. The young men had not had a shower for a while, and brought a horrible smell with them. They obviously hadn’t had that much to eat either, and started pocketing the sandwiches immediately. The plates were empty in a minute. “For our comrades in the park”, one of them said apologetically. But the most impressive moment came when they had finished criticizing the capitalist system and its excesses. Then it was the turn of “the system” to answer. A director-general of the European Commission stood up. The casting couldn’t have been better. He was grey-haired, a little on the heavy side, and wore a good suit (he was Dutch, by the way). And he said: “I feel like a turkey at Thanksgiving. You expect me to defend the system? Well, I won’t.” He explained he had been involved with the ’68 protests. This had also been a fight against the “system”. He said he sympathised with them. That they had good points. But having said that, he wanted to give them a piece of good advice: “Go into politics. Get involved. Change the system from the inside. That’s what we did. Don’t stay out, you influence will be zero.”

I am making this little detour in my story because it sums up the most important dilemma we have in Europe: we have a democratic political system, and still many citizens feel utterly powerless.

Democracy is national. The economy is mostly international by now. It is this mismatch that causes trouble. People start questioning the value of democracy itself.

But there is a second important side-effect of this process of globalization. What happens if you take the economy out of the national debate? You are left with soft issues. Issues that you can still decide upon at the national level: euthanasia, integration, abortion, the burka. All these touch on identity, religion, and values. They are polarizing issues. When you discuss the economy lots of facts and figures are involved. It is relatively easy to compromise and be good friends after a fierce political argument – like me and my father at the time on our couch. The next morning we had a good laugh at the breakfast table. But it’s hard to compromise on soft issues. The more you make your point, the more you insult others. The more you discuss them, the angrier everyone gets. Remember the poisonous Sylvana “discussion” spinning out of control?

Back to Europe again, to polarization versus pacification. The question is, how do we give politics more meaning again in such a way that citizens feel they have a say and a stake again? The most radical remedy would be to bring the economy and democracy back on the same level. That would mean either re-nationalizing the economy, or internationalizing parts of democracy. I’m not sure there is any appetite for either. Globalization is like a plane, and we’re in it. Pascal Lamy, the former chief of the WTO, once said: “It’s stupid to jump out in mid-flight. Globalization will go on without us.” The UK is now experiencing this. Taking back sovereignty solo, so radically, is a great way to shoot yourself in the foot. Internationalizing democracy is more interesting. Is the eurozone undemocratic? Let’s give her a parliament! But it can only work if citizens finally get active and learn about Europe and its workings, its meaning and its issues. If you want to get involved and help shape the future, you need to know where to go and what to do.

It would be great if a country like The Netherlands, in the heart of Europe, would help its citizens with that discovery. The future of this country is intimately connected with the future of the European project. If Europe needs a vision it is also the member states that have to help her to get there. Some countries are trying to formulate new common policies. It’s good news that France and Germany, who form the most important pillar of the EU, are finally discussing this again. Initially they never agree about anything, but this is precisely the point. Germany has been locked up in the north and France in the south, for almost a decade. Nothing moved, because they emphasized their differences. They polarized. Now Paris and Berlin are focussing again on what unites them – or what could/should unite them. They try to develop some kind of vision for the next decades. They pacify.

For The Netherlands, which is utterly dependent on Europe, this is a double-edged sword. We often feel squeezed between France and Germany. We like to follow the UK because it was the ideal counterbalance against those two. I’m saying “was”: the UK is out. The Dutch stakes are now all on the continent, just like those of the Czechs and Danes, who have long hidden behind the broad eurosceptic back of the UK. If they want to help shape the future of Europe, they will have to be right there. The Dutch Prime Minister can maintain that those who try to develop a vision for Europe “must see an eye doctor” – but this attitude will not do any longer, and I think he knows it. The country will have to become more European. Europe will move because everything around us is moving, too. Paris and Berlin will not wait for us. It is time to slowly prepare citizens for this. To give them a little more information about what, exactly, our ministers our doing in Brussels. Did you know, for instance, that two thirds of all decisions there are taken by unanimity? Meaning, all member states approved?

It is time to start correcting the idea of this “faraway bureaucracy” taking decisions far above our heads. No, it is not “eurocrats” patronizing us – often it’s rather our own ministers.

Let me wrap up by saying that I think that in one year, the mood has shifted immensely. A year ago all was gloom and doom. Everybody seemed convinced the EU would be torn to pieces. Well, she is still there. Battered and not very pretty, as usual - but stronger nevertheless. Extremists in several countries didn’t even come close to win elections. Constructive parties and politicians won instead. Everywhere there are interesting experiments going on by groups, movements and parties trying to give democracy a new start. Students in Germany and Switzerland refuse to sit on their hands any longer complaining that nothing works, and get politically active. People started waving European flags this year in over a hundred European cities. Here in The Hague little discussion groups about Europe spontaneously sprang up in private living rooms, organized via Facebook. There are zillions of big and small examples of this. Some will fail, some will get somewhere. Perhaps that’s the best thing of this political crisis: people realize most of us never had it so good, and that if we want to defend it we have to get up and do something. If we need reform, well: let’s try to bring it on. There is this wonderful saying by Edmund Burke: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”