

The big lie

Just back from driving an old friend to the airport in the rising sun of a magic Riviera; the spring has knocked at the door a couple of times but this time, it looks like it did step in. Nature is beautiful, lemon and orange trees blossoming, jasmin exploding, these sweet scents compete with seaweed smells and iodine. It is so beautiful, I wonder why men don't take time to look at it and enjoy it. Exactly like the European Union. The most successful ever peace project our grandfathers fought for in a time when it was not quite easy to tell the French and the Germans, to name just a happy few, they shall live together happily ever after.

Why lie to people today? And what's the big lie?

Just back from a week in London hearing and reading all kinds of horrors; I had a few sleepless nights and truly wondered – and still do – how politicians could so much and so irresponsibly lie to their citizens. Re the *why they lie, this is another question, which I shall address later.

Why cannot we deal with our own business? Why being dictated what to do from Brussels? We're fed up with the European Commission making decisions for us. "Spend Brussels billions on the NHS instead" (Johnson & Gove in *The Telegraph*, 15 April 2016). "Why being dictated how to run our own business from people we don't even vote for?" (quote from a politician on BBC Radio 2 in the morning of 15 April 2016, thought I was about to spit my coffee). Oh and why not re-enact the Commonwealth flourishing business we used to run?

So many quotes and statements, which are intrinsically flawed or, worse, big lies.

I am not for or against Brexit. Deep down, as the product of a Franco-German family background who lived and worked in, around and out of the EU for a dozen years, including a few crucial years in England and Northern Ireland, I can only pray for the UK to remain part of the family but I am not British, and I shall not judge. I am not asked to vote for such historical decision – whichever outcome – and I am quite happy not to be.

Who's Brussels? I'm only 37 so I can recall only about 15 years – though this is a long time – of politicians coming home to their national capitals complaining "Brussels" had decided this, "Brussels" had imposed that, etc. At this stage, after a decade working in and around the EU institutions, I'm quite impressed at the absolutely amazing powers of Brussels. *Petite* capital of an even more amazing country, which actually keeps Belgium together despite fierce fights between the Flemish and Walloon communities, Brussels seems to have strong powers, ruling the fate of 500 million citizens. Always watch the Belgians out, it seems. Well, "Brussels" is Cameron, Hollande, Merkel, and the whole lot of heads of states and governments. By the way, we have to say "and governments" as our British friends, to once again name a happy few only, don't have a head of state. So here we are with politicians making decisions at a supranational level while blaming

the very system allowing them to do so. The European Union is just like a big European *union. The EU level is just another layer. EU leaders facing similar economic and demographic issues in their respective countries, they find it easier to sit together to find solutions. They find it easier to make necessary yet unpopular decisions together at a supranational level. It has to be done, so let's do it together and then we'll find a way to tell our citizens. That's when the magic 007-type protection umbrella operates. EU leaders go back home, open the umbrella, and whinge at what "Brussels" – again – decided. But who voted those decisions? They forget to tell.

Who makes decisions in Brussels? Namely those who blame "Brussels" for all evils, heads of states and governments. Yet, and there is where the biggest lie lies, they only share half of the power. The other half is our hands, European citizens with a vote right. I am talking about the European Parliament.

The huge majority of us think the European Parliament has little power, if any. That was true, but no longer is. The European Parliament has never had so much power. It was created back in 1979 namely because the EU founders thought unfair to create some kind of supranational entity without citizens having their say. So they were asked to directly elect their own representatives.

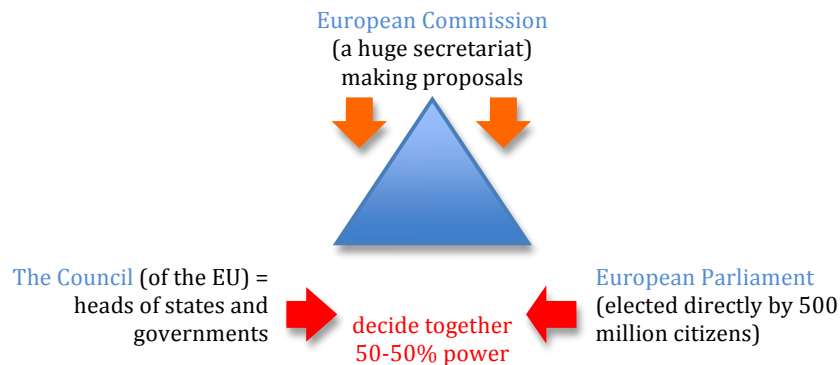
Very true however, the Parliament was an institution, which was mainly consulted and not quite listened to by the EU heads of states and governments. Thus started a long teenage crisis on the part of the European Parliament. It relentlessly strove for more power until it reached the ultimate way of being listened to; what is called "co-decision" in the legislative EU jargon. Co-decision very clearly states that if the European Parliament does not agree with the heads of states and governments, the latter just cannot ignore them and move on. When the European Parliament cannot agree with EU leaders basically, the European Commission legislative proposal just dies out. And no matter how many miraculous powers "Brussels" seems to hold, nobody has ever seen a Commission proposal rise from the dead in the legislative cemetery.

In other words, the only counter-power to our national leaders at EU level is the Members of the European Parliament, whom we – citizens – elect directly. This may so well explain why national politicians and governments do not explain to their citizens why European Parliament elections are important. Why indeed explain to your citizens that, should they disagree with you, they have the power to counter you at a supranational level? This is the big lie. Not even a so-called white lie, but an ill-intentioned black one.

"Co-decision" used to be reserved to very hot issues; the kind of decisions, where to be politically correct, EU leaders could not do without listening to the European Parliament, since they represent a little 500 million citizens. Now however, with the Lisbon Treaty, co-decision has become the norm and so much so that it is no longer called "co-decision" but "ordinary legislative procedure". How interesting that politicians never told their citizens about it(!)

In 2016, none of our national decision-making processes across the EU is more simple than the EU one. Intellectuals and politicians (intellectual politicians looking an endangered species) bragging about the complexity of Brussels, of a

decision-making process, which is far too difficult to grasp and explain to their constituencies, are simply lying once again. The day after the 2014 EP elections in France, President Hollande exclaimed live on all news channels that he sympathized with his French people regarding the very low vote turnout, complaining that the EU decision-making process was too complicated, *even for him. Graduate of the most famous and highly regarded school of administration himself, president of the French republic, how can he responsibly declare this to 60 million people when the basics of the EU decision-making process is something that can be taught to primary school pupils?



In short, the European Commission proposes, heads of states and governments together with the European Parliament decide. And most importantly, the European Parliament has now equal power with the Council.

I dare call the European Commission a huge secretariat yet again, another big lie goes about the number of civil servants there. They are reaching about 33,000, of whom only 21,500 are Brussels-based. If you consider they do the job of dealing with a 500 million people entity, I guess this is pretty reasonable. Just for the fun, Paris City Hall itself employs 55,000 civil servants. Yet *again, France invented red tape.

Why do national governments forget to tell their country that Eurodeputies have as much power as they do in Brussels? Are they too happy cooking their own little cuisine without too much bothering about the representatives of 500 million people? How irresponsible once again because, no matter how low the vote turnout may be, Eurodeputies get elected. So a responsible way to face the fact that the EP has equal power in the EU decision-making process would be to actually make sure that European-hearted – or not – yet good, sensible, capable, and dedicated politicians are elected as Eurodeputies. Political parties should stop sending to Brussels politicians they want to get rid of at home. The irony is that doing so, they are actually given them so much more power(!) Indeed, EU law has precedence over national law.

So how can I hear in London that we are dictated decisions “by people we don’t even vote for”? The scapegoat-ing of “Brussels” as mother of all evils is easy. It has been a long on-going process now reaching its inevitable although logical consequence; Europeans are utterly fed up with “Brussels” and want to get rid of it. How sad for our grandfathers dying in the two World Wars, our grandparents

secretly active in the Resistance and hiding Jews wherever possible, our grandparents acting for a European project, for which they had no model and therefore creating everything from scratch, fixing and improving it as it grew. I hope they cannot see what our contemporary politicians are doing of the most successful peace project of all times.

I am upset, not that Europeans are tired of Europe, but that they got tired of it for the wrong reasons. I am upset with the big lies. Politicians these days have lost honesty, vision and any sense of responsibility. They are in for their own glory and pride. This is part of the EU's biggest challenge. Because the EU fights against one language taking over for the sake of cultural diversity and the respect of all EU national identities, Europe does not have a European media *per se*. Problem is for politicians, they want to be seen in the media. And that is still a national matter. Despite Jürgen Habermas's dream, there still is no European public sphere. This is why so few politicians are keen to go and sit in Brussels. They then get forgotten at home, and for any politician, that is wrong.

The press plays a big responsibility in this with – contrary to the renowned French Jean Quatremer – EU correspondents leaving Brussels as soon as they have got the gist of it. I am still praying for the College of Europe to open a department for journalists (a decade long battle on my part). Reporting about the EU is a real job, and not just a two-year experience in one's journalist career. This is why one can read (and die reading it!) such horrors as “The European Commission decided that...” for the Commission only wishes it did(!) after years of public consultations and drafting of the best possible proposals only to see the Council and the EP chop and change it all.

Why do countries not teach their youth about Brussels? The Europa Diary is a great example. Born of the initiative of an originally Scottish yet EU-DNA made woman hand in hand with another strong-minded and fearless woman at the European Commission, the Europa Diary was this diary in which teenagers took notes and wrote their homework in high school. 90 pages of it was full of elements of life school does not usually teach about and teachers, as much as students, loved it. They ordered it straight in Brussels, for free, in their own language, with a mine of information about their country, the EU, what it meant to them and what was in it for them. It was published in 23 languages and in 29 editions (the French ones being different for French-speaking Belgians and the French for instance) and had a 3.5 million print run. After the Erasmus programme, the Europa Diary was probably the most successful project, which young people loved. So why kill it? This is when, once again, national states play their role. They say they can address their young people themselves; they can do the job themselves, etc. Ok so why not do it? After years thriving and hundreds of thousands of teachers ordering the Europa Diary every year, the project was killed over a national row; and nothing replaces it today.

When now meeting students, I realize how much they are interested in knowing more about the EU. I always feel delighted that they wish to know how the world they live in works; and yet I feel so devastated that nobody has talked to them about it before. Some of them even went to their schoolmaster to ask for a study trip to Brussels. How miraculous that some young people seem to be such

responsible citizens when the education system failed offering them to become some! How can current governments complain at how disinterested and hopeless their youth is? Why refuse to teach them they have a say in their lives – hence in politics – in the first place? This is part of the big lie.

I am upset finally because not teaching citizens about the power democracy offers them, keeping essential information away from them to better pull strings is – to me – a basic ingredient of dictatorship. How ironic to then hear, from highly educated British politicians, that “Brussels” is *dictating them anything!

We’re not dictated anything in the first place; even less from people we don’t vote for in the second place; then what about Johnson & Cove’s sound bite to spare the billions sent to the EU for the NHS?

EU leaders – once again – forget to explain that the money they send to “Brussels” does actually come back to their citizens. Have you not noticed for years the small EU flag on those big boards by renovation works, new local constructions, etc? “Funded by the European Union”, “Funded by the Regional Development Fund”, etc. And what about the money being redistributed to all kinds of local associations, national foundations, ... farmers? How easy to offer people to pay off the huge NHS deficit! Who could disagree? Nobody I feel. Yet Johnson & Cove do not say what will happen to those to whom the EU money will stop flowing. If they give the EU billions to the NHS, how will the UK in its turn support the myriad of British citizens, associations and businesses, which will no longer get financial help from the EU?

With the reign of social media and new technologies, politicians have to come up with sound bites everyday to make sure they do not lose ground. Yet twitting and sharing on Facebook takes less time than thinking one’s own statements through. It is somewhat similar to the terrible situation quality media are facing, when doing a professional job crossing sources to double-check the veracity of information, while some less scrupulous so-called journalists publish without checking for the sake of hitting the headlines on the one hand, and while most of us have become “journalists” relaying posts and tweets at the speed of light without knowing whether the information are correct. Professional journalism has never been such a challenging job. Yet why play the game of politicians? The media plays an immense, yet sadly often disregarded, educational role.

Brexit is a great opportunity to talk about the EU we want or don’t want. It is raising the debate in all other Member States as well, but British citizens and all of us, other EU citizens, need to be careful to what national politicians tell us. They seem to suffer from some sort of schizophrenia enjoying a supranational institutional level as a scullery for their secret cooking while forgetting about it once back home only to strongly blame the resulting cuisine.

Watch out the big lie.

2,643 words

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