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The "Future of Europe"

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The Conference on the Future of Europe was set up to provide recommendations to EU leaders on changing the EU. The intent is to formally submit its findings on the EU’s Europe Day (9 May 2022).

Even before that event, the core documents are already in the public domain so we can review their findings and anticipate the subsequent response.

We already have precedent on what happens next from the Convention on the Future of Europe. This was set up in response to the Laeken Declaration by heads of government in 2001. Laeken contained an invitation to consider expanding but also removing powers from the EU. This however ended up as a power grab, generating an EU Constitution. When that was rejected in referenda, the text was slightly diluted and then pushed through as the Lisbon Treaty. The democratic controversy surrounding this process has been a major feature behind the pause in transferring more powers to the EU level. But the lesson is clear: the process leads to more powers handed over to Brussels.

Why call it a “Conference”? The Lisbon Treaty introduced a formal process for running a new Constitutional Convention. Triggering one generates the intent from the outset of pursuing a major treaty change and formally brings in MEPs keen to pursue it. This process has been ducked as it would have removed power from national governments in controlling the end agenda.

Nevertheless, the recommendations arising from this alternative process are important as they still frame the general parameters of debate in what we expect will follow: an InterGovernmental Conference (IGC).¹

What is significant is that

- The reports do continue the process of salami slicing of national sovereignty (see below for details)
- They do not shut down major integrationist pet projects, in particular President Macron’s big push for EU Defence integration (necessarily a developing risk to NATO integrity and effectiveness)
- The timing is embarrassing for the Danish Government as it tries to convince its voters in a referendum on 1 June 2022 to drop its opt out on Defence
- Given these inescapable trends, it shows the UK was right to pursue Brexit

Headline Controversies

Many proposals are controversial in different ways. Three immediately stand out.

Two proposals in the “EU in the world” section are badly timed for the EU, as the Danish Government is seeking to drop its CSDP opt out (granted after its first rejection of

¹ Details of the Conference, including links to the reports of the working groups, can be found at <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/reporting>

Maastricht) in a referendum on 1 June. They support a unified but strategically-hamstrung common army, plus the loss of the national veto in how to deploy it.

A third proposal is embarrassing because it seeks to expand the EU's already massive PR (or propaganda) capability with the expressly-stated aim of targeting Eurosceptics, such as those involved in the No side in that very referendum. It simply sees them as the enemy needing defeat through propaganda: hardly a healthy strategy in a democracy.

These proposals state;

- **“We recommend that a future ‘Joint Armed Forces of the European Union’ shall predominantly be used for self-defence purposes. Aggressive military action of any kind is precluded. Within Europe, this would entail a capacity to provide support in times of crises such as in the case of natural catastrophes. Outside European borders this would provide the capacity to be deployed in territories in exceptional circumstances and exclusively under a respective legal mandate from the United Nations Security Council and thus in compliance with international law.** Were this recommendation implemented it would allow the European Union to be perceived as a credible, responsible, strong and peaceful partner on the international stage. Its enhanced capacity to respond to critical situations both internally and externally is thus expected to protect its fundamental values.”
- **“We recommend that all issues decided by way of unanimity are changed to be decided by way of a qualified majority. The only exceptions should be the admission of new membership to the EU and changes to the fundamental principles of the EU as stated in Art. 2 of the Lisbon Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.** This will consolidate the position of the EU in the world by presenting a united front towards third countries and agilise [sic] its response in general and in particular in crisis situations.”
- **“We recommend that the European Union allocate a specific budget to develop educational programmes on the functioning of the EU and its values. Then it will be proposed to the Member States that wish that they can integrate them into their school curricula (primary, secondary schools, and universities). In addition, a specific course on the EU and its functioning could be offered to students wishing to study in another European country through the Erasmus programme. Students choosing this course would be given priority in the allocation of said Erasmus programmes.** We recommend this to strengthen the sense of belonging to the EU. This will enable citizens to better identify with the EU and transmit its values. Moreover, it will also improve transparency regarding the functioning of the EU, the benefits of being part of it, and the fight against anti-European movements. This should act as a deterrent to Member States leaving the EU.”

Recommendations from the Conference

The following can be found in the respective Panel recommendations.

“Stronger economy, social justice and jobs / youth, sport, culture and education / digital transformation”

- Introduction of a Brussels-run minimum wage
- Tighter limits of working hours, including targeting some jobs
- EU inputs into school curricula and wider teaching material on issues including empathy, biodiversity, internet safety, climate change, mental health, sexual education and migration – starting at primary schools
- EU to directly help students if their country faces another health crisis or goes to war
- EU to legislate in support of remote working (notwithstanding Jacob Rees-Mogg’s calling cards)
- Manufacturers to be taxed to establish green zones around old sites
- EU-based taxes to end plastic containers in shops
- Complete tax and fiscal harmonisation across the EU
- Standardised connectors (by inference, an end to national plugs)
- Access to the internet to become a human right
- “local insects to be respected and protected against invasive species”
- Harmonised human rights over social policy including health
- EU competency to harmonise pensions. Accelerated retirement age for some jobs.
- “measures to encourage an increase in the birth rate as well as to ensure appropriate childcare”
- “the EU should support palliative care and assisted death [euthanasia] following a concrete set of rules and regulations”
- The EU to support access to “decent” social housing for citizens “according to their specific needs”
- Increased parental leave and associated rights
- Greater EU role in sports and promoting fitness (there is a possible hint of one hour supported fitness time per week at the workplace)
- Pushing multilingualism at primary school to “help create a common European identity”. Common minimum primary school standard to “reinforce and strengthen a common European identity, fostering togetherness, unity and sense of belonging”
- The teaching of English in primary schools as Europe’s common language and to build a common identity (!)
- More powers for Europol over cybercrime
- European 5G (inferred: not Chinese, or American)
- The EU to set up and run an organisation tackling fake news (but, we note, at risk of becoming a propaganda agency in its own right), to include innovative approaches such as designing computer games to get the message across. Also and separately, an official EU fact checking organisation, including assessing the credibility of mainstream news providers across all media - including newspapers, radio and tv
- Tighter GDPR provisions. Reinforced *droit à l’oubli* (already controversial because of a French President’s pardoned nominee). Mega-fines and bans for non-compliance even of international companies. New GDPR Euroquango issuing obligatory certificates for everyone covered by GDPR rules
- New Eurospam Agency with massive fine and banning powers

“European democracy/values, rights, rule of law, security”

- EU-decided subsidies and quotas for companies employing youth, elders, women, minorities
- Companies required to run kindergartens and playgrounds, if over a certain size
- Taxing emissions, pesticides, and agriculture with high water demands (the latter without noting rainfall differential)
- Expansion of the right to withhold EU payments to member states
- Break up of large media conglomerates and a ban on politicians owning media (the wording also creates difficulties for the BBC appointments process)
- Renaming the EU institutions – the Council to become the “Senate”, the Commission to become the “Executive Commission” (ie becoming openly a federal system in name)
- Voting for transnational rather than national parties in MEP elections
- MEPs to have the power to trigger a binding pan-EU referendum
- Move towards ending the national veto (for background, QMV already applies in 80% of cases)
- Creation of a vague “common economic structure” for the EU, pursuing a common standard of living
- Increased taxation of large corporations, with funds spent by the EU
- All schools to teach about the EU, European citizenship and European ethics, to “limit populism”
- Expansion of funding for programmes “to stimulate the European identity”
- Migrants to be taught about “European identity and values” as part of their settlement process
- More corporate EU direct and indirect engagement in media: “We recommend that the information issued in the different Member States about the EU be the same in order to promote integration and avoid different information on different issues in each country”
- New quango of “citizen observers” set up “to carry out the function of broadcasting relevant and important information to all EU citizens as defined EU citizens” – intriguingly, to operate in opposition to politicians
- Start the process again of generating an EU Constitution, to “counteract increasing forces of nationalism”

“Climate change, environment / health”

- More car-free zones in cities
- An “Environmental Charter”
- Additional product labelling, grading environmental impact
- Much tighter constraints within areas of identified environmental interest
- Implied subsidy for farm workers
- Tighter controls over imported foodstuffs by introducing “loyal competition” on standards (this is protectionism, likely to be in breach of WTO rules, and will considerably increase consumer prices within the EU compared with the UK)
- Similar rules to be introduced relating to imported goods and working standards (also a WTO issue)
- Taxes on unhealthy (processed) food; revenue generated to be used by the EU to subsidise and advertise healthy food. “Make unhealthy food less visible in supermarkets” seems to imply coercion.

- EU to run an online fix-it platforms to show how to repair broken items to reduce consumption
- Bans on advertising products considered to be unsustainable (the end scope here is considerable)
- Containers to be returned to manufacturers to refill them for resale
- Rules on packaging so they take up less space
- Restrictions on imports of “low quality” and non-local produce
- More regulations on imported fashion products
- Fewer imports of goods generally that have a higher ecological footprint
- Standardised healthcare wages and hours. Common training
- Increased powers for the European Medicines Agency or the creation of a new European medicines procurement agency to manage purchases/pricing
- Creation of a new EU Healthcare Database centralising patient data (patients to have the right to opt out)
- End to the EU’s ‘tampon tax’ (a feature of the Brexit debate...)
- Harmonisation of eligibility for fertility treatment across the EU
- EU-set minimum standards for dental care
- Free first courses, obligatory for students and public and private sector workplaces
- Minimum numbers of defibrillators in public places
- Discourage private healthcare providers receiving public funds

“EU in the world / migration”

- Subsidise and protect agricultural products, semiconductors, medical products, innovative digital and environmental technologies, as being considered strategic sectors
- (Expanded) support for a high speed EU rail and freight network
- Imports to require certification that they comply with new qualitative, ethical, sustainable and human rights standards
- EU subsidy for SMEs to be cheaper than imports in strategic sectors
- New European Agency for Immigration with, implied, what amounts to overseas consulates
- FRONTEX to become operationally and functionally independent (notwithstanding the pending release of a Court of Auditors investigation...)
- New EU Agency facilitating cooperation on renewables
- Further step towards a Common Nuclear Policy
- Increased EU propaganda: “School visits by EU politicians, radio, podcasts, direct post, press, bus campaigns, social media, local citizen assemblies and creating a special task force to improve EU communication. These measures will allow the citizens to get EU information that is not filtered through national media.
- Greater social and cultural integration before more countries join the EU (this may be an unwelcome message to send to Ukraine)
- A common European labour framework, including common minimum wage, in order to discourage free movement of workers within the EU (!). Development of cross-border trades unions
- An extended EU Agency for Asylum and common system

Rejected Recommendations

A small number of items were considered but rejected, and thus set some bare limits on what an IGC is likely to endorse. These include;

- MEPs should raise awareness of physical activity by "role modelling", for example by a short period of stretching, talking while walking around the chamber, or jumping
- Creating a central EU database with all a person's sensitive information on so that the EU could oversee it being accessed under GDPR provisions
- EU support for school lessons on cooking and healthy eating
- Higher taxes for meat and sugar, and unhealthy food to be put in a higher VAT bracket
- Relocating industries within the EU on climate grounds
- EU fines or grants based on urban environmental performance
- Limiting cruise ships
- Harmonising railway gauge
- Companies to supply ethics audits of their supply chains
- A protocol preparing for the arrival of millions of climate refugees which also allows their flooded homelands to be turned into giant wind farms

Conclusions

The credibility of the very conference has already been called into question. Eurosceptic political parties complained that what was meant to be a fair debate involving a wide representation of delegates has ended up as a stitch up. Random selection proved not to be so random. Even the Executive Board running matters (and selecting experts to present papers) consisted of three EU insiders: a European Commissioner (and former MEP); President Macron's Europe Minister; and the noted federalist MEP Guy Verhofstadt.

Some mitigated clauses show very limited success in a rearguard action by Eurosceptics to try to limit the scope of ambition. However, it is clear that the Conference is a repeat performance of the Convention – a range delegates all pushing for small bits of more power going towards Brussels, and the federalists collating and aggregating these into a grand package in the expectation that at least a portion of these will stick.

So what has emerged is an invitation for "more Europe", now to be aggressively deployed as a "popular" justification by those pursuing the federalist agenda. This was precisely the same trick and end result that happened over 2002-2003.² It was called at the time "Brussels speaking to Brussels" and ended up with an EU Constitution whose rejection in referenda triggered the last EU crisis. We can expect more polarisation and public disillusionment with Europe's deaf elites to come.

² A review of what happened in the original Convention can be found here: http://www.theredcell.co.uk/uploads/9/6/4/0/96409902/plan_b_for_europe_lost_opportunities_in_the_eu_constitution_debate_pdf.pdf

