

Introductory remarks session 3 (The Historical Development: Japan, Belgium and Europe)

JAPAN EU CONFERENCE

The European Union is part of the DNA of Belgian politics (if you hear the EU criticized, then mostly because there is not enough of it)

The European Union is more than a source of national legislation. It is a vital part of the Belgian political and institutional set-up as it triggered the establishment of a performant consultation and coordination mechanism between the several levels of government. Coordination between the different levels is essential to make the system work as each level has its own competences and there is no hierarchy between them.

Europe has never been seen a problem for the mainstream of Belgian politicians. On the contrary, it is usually seen as the solution to a number of problems imposed upon us by a globalized world. (You heard it reaffirmed this morning by Vice Premier Peeters.)

Yet, we cannot turn a blind eye to the skepticism with which the European project is met in a growing part of our society. This is the outcome of a larger and deeper rooted phenomenon (it also fuels the resistance against TTIP for instance) affecting many countries in Europe. It is triggered by a number of factors. To name just a few: job insecurity, fear of immigration, erosion of traditional values, tensions between individualism and the need for personal development versus the need for interpersonal solidarity or between the respect of individual liberties versus the raising demand for security and law and order. All

this resulting in a growing distrust of politics and politicians, of political institutions in general and technocracy in particular.

The answer to this growing unease with the European project is not the creation of an European identity. The European identity will always be but a complement of the national and regional identities.

Belgium believes that the answer lays rather in the strengthening of the democratic legitimation of the European Union and in an European Union able to provide tangible benefits, also in sensitive fields like social and fiscal policy, energy and immigration policies. In a nutshell: more Europe.

Our mid-term goal for Europa is to strengthen the Union by means of a stronger and more efficient Commission, a generalized use of qualified majority voting and co-decision for legislative acts and the application of qualified majority or constructive abstention in ESDP matters.

Concluding remarks at the end of the Conference:

150 years is a long time and it is not easy to find a common denominator to link all the milestones that mark the 15 decades long history of diplomatic, political, economic, academic and people-to-people relations.

‘Innovation rooted in tradition’ might be a good candidate. Since we have been speaking of our economic relations this afternoon, Asahi Glass Corporation springs to mind: the construction of its first plant in Japan was entrusted to a Belgian engineer back in 1907. Nowadays Belgium hosts the company’s global center for flat glass and groundbreaking R&D for the automobile and construction industry. But there are countless other examples.

‘Innovation rooted in tradition’ will also be a recurrent theme in the State Visit of His Majesty King Philippe and Her Majesty Queen Mathilde next month. The Royal Family will be accompanied by many CEO’s and economic seminars and activities will abound. But a State Visit is much more than a trade mission. His Majesty will also be accompanied by the Rectors of most of the Belgian universities and prominent personalities from the cultural circles. Given the excellent relations between both our countries, the expectations for this visit are very high. You can all help to make them reality.

This conference proved a source of inspiration for strengthening our bilateral relations and is therefore a valuable contribution to the preparation of this State Visit. I wish to thank the organizers and the speakers, and especially Professor Takako Ueta, for this memorable event.

