

# Social Europe

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## The European Commission: The Celebration Of Confusion

*by Sergio Fabbrini on 16 March 2017*



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The European Commission's White Book on the future of Europe provides a modest and confused contribution to the discussion which should lead to the Statement of Rome on 25 March. Modest because there is no serious reflection on the causes of the European crisis, a crisis which has even led to the secession of an important country (the United Kingdom) from the European Union (EU). Confused because it sets out (fully) five scenarios for the EU's future which seem to be the result of some university seminar rather than real political reflection.

This White Book says more about the crisis the Commission is going through than it does about the

crisis the EU finds itself in. Despite the Juncker Commission continuing to present itself as the parliamentary government of the EU, it is in reality an institutional hybrid: a nature at the root of its confusion.

The White Book is confused because it has no political soul. It discusses the EU's future as if the latter were an international organisation. Its approach is inspired by the functionalism used by David Mitrany to conceptualise the development of cooperation among organisations at the international level. In the White Book it is in fact argued that

“form will follow function”. An incomprehensible claim in the EU’s case. If the EU is, and wants to be, a democratic organisation, then the form of its institutions cannot be the consequence of the functions it carries out. Its institutions must ensure citizens’ participation in the decisions on the policies (or “functions”) which concern them – unless citizens are considered merely as consumers. Bereft of any sense of democracy, it is inevitable that the scenarios the Commission has set out are then incomprehensible.

Let’s consider them, starting from the two extreme scenarios, that of “carrying on” and that of “doing much more together”. How is it possible to imagine the policy of “business as usual” when the EU, faced with internal and external changes, will have to take decisions which will also impact on its institutional arrangements? Negotiations are starting with the UK, negotiations which will require a review of the distribution of seats in the European Parliament or a redefinition of national contributions to financing the EU budget. At the same time, given the rebirth of nationalist movements, it is surprising the idea that it is necessary to do everything together, in other words that “cooperation between all Member States (should go) further than ever before in all domains” (sic), merits mention at all. Take note, the phrase is “all domains”, as if integration aimed to build a European state replacing nation states. This is an ideology which provides an alibi to its enemies.

Between these two extreme scenarios, the Commission identifies three more scenarios, which are equally hard to justify. One is that of “nothing but the single market”, cancelling at a stroke what happened after Maastricht. Will that ever be possible? It doesn’t look like it. Another is that of letting “those who want more do more” (giving rise to coalitions among willing countries to pursue specific programmes or enhanced cooperation in EU parlance). But what do these multiple differentiated co-operations mean for democratic legitimisation? No mention is made of that. The final scenario is “doing less more efficiently”, as if efficiency were inversely proportional to the number of things being done. What a strange idea. In short, the scenarios proposed by the Commission seem to be a real dog’s breakfast. There is no reference framework and no idea of the priorities to be followed. If the Commission really were a parliamentary government, then we’d be in deep trouble.

Its confusion is due to a mental straitjacket in which it (but not only it) is held prisoner, namely the sacred standing of the principle that integration’s finality should be the same for all the (now) EU-27 member states. Since this principle is unrealistic, its defence makes

the functioning of the EU more rigid. Such rigidity ends up justifying the pressure to differentiate policies, giving rise to a Europe by specific projects (or policies) involving (each one of them) different clusters of member states. The more the EU differentiates itself in those projects, the more the common framework crumbles, making it impossible for citizens to understand who does what. Since, however, the differentiated policies impact on citizens' lives, it is inevitable that citizens' lack of satisfaction with the outcomes of those policies makes itself felt at national level, since there is no possibility of affecting the European decision-making process. Thus, the EU-27 straitjacket ends up working in favour of nationalist sovereign-ism, with its disintegrating effects. Congratulations.

In order to neutralise those effects, it would be necessary to create separate institutional contexts. A separation based on facts and not on abstract scenarios. In the EU there is already a distinction between those who wish to take part only in the single market and those who instead participate also in more advanced integration programmes (such as those of the Eurozone with the related intergovernmental treaties and of the Schengen area). If we consider the countries which take part in these two programmes, we can see that there is, already, a group of 18 countries which are present in both. It would be necessary to transform that nucleus into a political union, with its own institutional framework, yet operating within the shared single market. A political union with clear limits on the competences which it can take on. The Commission believes instead that the integration process has an outcome which is always open-ended, evolving, growing. It is necessary to change that perspective and establish the basic policies which the union must handle, leaving everything else to the member states. The future of Europe lies in creating a sovereign (in some policies) union of sovereign (in other policies) states.