

23.02.2017

Keynote speech by Prime Minister Joseph Muscat at CEPS Ideas Lab: reconstructing the Union

"I will not speak here as Prime Minister of the Member State holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, that is a very important caveat for me, but as a European who is fed up of us going round in circles, and of someone who wants to provoke debate."

We are told this is the time of disruptive presidents and administrations. What better time is there to embrace this attitude than at a laboratory of ideas. After all, we know that the essence of laboratories are experiments, most of which are doomed to fail in order to give birth to the much sought-after innovations.

I was strongly urged to deliver a well-prepared, diplomatically articulated, and strategically balanced speech, which I can assure you would have bored you to death. Instead, I have chosen to try to get into the spirit of this event by proposing ideas, some sensible, others risky, yet others which might sound, and be, outright insane.

I will not speak here as Prime Minister of the Member State holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, that is a very important caveat for me, but as a European who is fed up of us going round in circles, and of someone who wants to provoke debate.

Europe should become the bitcoin continent

The Euro is a political project that, because of its nature, has survived crises which an incomplete fiscal and monetary union could not have done on paper. Now is the time to double down with yet another unthinkable project. The rise of crypto currencies can be slowed but cannot be stopped. Some financial institutions are painstakingly accepting the fact that the system at the back of such transactions is much more efficient and transparent than the classical ones. My point is that rather than resist, European regulators should innovate and create mechanisms in which to regulate crypto currencies, in order to harness their potential and better protect consumers, while making Europe the natural home of innovators.

Citizenship as an innovative policy tool

This is, I admit, controversial. But it is also something I passionately believe in. When Malta introduced an innovative Citizenship by Investment programme in 2014, we were sneered upon by many. I realise that the mainstream concept of citizenship is as conservative as it might get, even to some of the most liberal minds I know. Speaking

23.02.2017

with the benefit of experience, I can say that citizenship can be one of the most innovative policy tools for any European Union member state. At a time when so much talent, so many beautiful minds are looking for a new home, citizenship is one key attraction that can make Europe unbeatable in the global race of the future. Well, even if Europe does not take this up, we have already done so and intend on perfecting this approach.

A European Social Pact

Everyone, even keen free marketeers such as myself, now acknowledge that globalisation not only has its limits, but has created new inequalities. Now is the time for Europe to show it gets it, by agreeing to a European Social Pact that has to be the cornerstone to a Social Union aimed at promoting all types of equalities and social mobility. It is clear that at this point there is a clear majority of member states, but no unanimity, in favour of this project. Time is not on our side and I do not see any way forward other than a coalition of the willing, wanting to push forward this agenda. But it will be a start, and a solid start.

The European Integration Brexit Fund

We all know that one of the thorniest issues during the Brexit negotiations will be the exit fee that our British friends will have to settle. I will not discuss the quantum here and now. I am aware that the bill consists of contributions to programmes and pensions, amongst others. Nevertheless, I believe it would be a political mistake to treat this as simply an accounting transaction. I submit that there needs to be a political agreement that a substantial part of this settlement, or its equivalent, be used to create a new European fund which will invest in communities which feel most detached from the European project. A programme that fights some of the main social and regional disparities that lead to Brexit-type phenomena.

Open negotiations on Chapter 24 with Turkey

We all know that the situation in Turkey is delicate, to say the least. On one hand, the Turkish government could not stand still in the face of an attempted coup. On the other hand, part of the reaction has now become heavy handed. I am a strong believer that faced with all this, the European Union should engage even more with Turkey. A few days ago I had the Turkish Prime Minister as my guest. When I put forward the point of human rights and freedom of expression, he retorted that if the EU is so worried about this, we should then agree to open the chapter dealing with justice, freedom and security. You know what, I think he is right. If we are so concerned, and I would add that we are justified to be so, why not engage in meaningful discussions on Turkey adopting the European acquis in this area. Needless to say, there is an essential pre-requisite that needs to be satisfied from the Turkish side, that is the recognition of all Member States.

So, it takes two to tango, but we need to be brave to achieve progress.

I do hope that this short and to-the-point speech, with five ideas, provide the necessary food for thought for the necessary experiments in this ideas lab. I look forward to your reactions.

23.02.2017



Photo: DOI - Clifton Fenech



Photo: DOI - Clifton Fenech

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/eu2017mt/32914993492/in/dateposted/>
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/eu2017mt/33071320865/in/photostream/>