

Who rules Europe? *The News*

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A year ago, the French press was proclaiming a "Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis" against the Iraq war. Now *Le Monde* headlines a "Berlin-London-Paris axis", epitomised by yesterday's trilateral summit between Schröder, Chirac and Blair. I wonder what next year's axis will be? A year ago, leaders of non-axis European countries responded to the Paris-Berlin-Moscow alignment with a "letter of eight", reaffirming their commitment to Athletics. This week, leaders of non-axis states sent a "letter of six" to the presidency of the European Union, stealing the thunder of Europe's big three by laying out their own ideas for European economic reform, the main subject of the Berlin summit. I wonder what next year's dissenting letter will be.

The great game called Wider Europe is under way. It's quite as enjoyable as the board game Diplomacy, and as softly treacherous. No one knows how it will end. But here's one prediction: it won't end with a directorate of France, Germany and Britain telling all the other countries in Europe what to do. Yalta this isn't. It's a very good thing that the leaders of Europe's three biggest countries got together. Between them, they account for more than half the GDP and defence spending of the whole enlarged EU of 25 member states. If they are at loggerheads, Europe goes nowhere - as we saw over Iraq. Militarily, Britain and France have at least come up with a proposal to make Europe a featherweight beside America's Mike Tyson. Economically, Europe is still going nowhere fast. In fact, the German economy just shrank and the French economy is barely growing. The economic reforms our leaders were talking about yesterday, in the regrettable and frankly childish absence of Gordon Brown, are simply vital for our future. Europe's leaders have a stated objective of making Europe the most competitive economy in the world by 2010. If you believe that can be achieved, you'll believe anything.

As our manufacturing disappears to China, our services to India and our scientists to America, the real question is whether we can stop ourselves falling further behind. Tragically, Schröder's people have been handing out a little red book, explaining the very modest economic reforms that have already cost him the leadership of his party. In the 1960s, Europe was booming, while China handed out little red books with the sayings of Chairman Mao. Now China is

booming, and Europe is handing out little red books. The Italians are hopping mad at being excluded from the top table. Silvio Berlusconi has called yesterday's meeting "a big mess". The Spaniards aren't happy either, Poles mutter about a new Yalta, and all the smaller countries in Europe rail against the large ones that are trying to lord it over them. But Berlusconi - a man seemingly born with his foot in his mouth - is wrong again. The "big mess" is Europe itself. Yesterday's summit was a first attempt to start tidying it up. Part of the mess is inevitable: a new Europe is being born, and all births are messy. It was not inevitable that Europe should propose to itself a vaingloriously entitled constitution and then fail to agree on it. Nor that the president of the European commission should be off campaigning to defeat Berlusconi, while other commissioners take time out to secure their own futures. None the less, working out how a union of 25 states could work was always going to involve some trial and error.

The Berlin summit was trial, not error. There are two reasons why it won't be the beginning of a permanent directorate. First, it brought together three politically weakened leaders of states that still have very different approaches to Europe and to each other. An adviser to Chirac says the Franco-German marriage remains fundamental to French European policy; many Germans agree. So long as they stick to the marriage metaphor, this makes Tony Blair either lover or mistress. That's a good reason for abandoning the metaphor, not the threesome. The underlying differences remain. It was very noticeable at yesterday evening's press conference that Chirac was effusive in his thanks to Schröder and praise for the Franco-German special relationship, while not mentioning Blair or Britain once. Meanwhile, Britain has many other hands tugging at its sleeve: those of its Iraq war allies, such as Spain and Poland, and its allies in economic liberalisation, such as the Scandinavian countries; the long arm of the US and the tweedy paws of domestic Euro scepticism. In any case, even if France, Germany and Britain were as thick as thieves, as close as the three witches in Macbeth, as loyal as the three musketeers, the other 22 countries still wouldn't do what they say.

So Berlin was just a beginning. The new, enlarged Europe won't work at all if everything depends on the conclusions of 25 heads of state sitting round that vast new table in the Council of Ministers building in Brussels. Its constitutional ar-

rangements are up in the air. They won't provide for a European government deciding matters by majority vote or strong leadership from a single president of Europe. What remains is what has driven the European project forward for 50 years: strategic cooperation between national governments. In the old European community of six states, France and Germany were the key drivers, while Italy and the Benelux countries were willing partners. It remains true today that if France and Germany don't act together, nothing much will go forward in Europe. However, it's no longer true that if they do, it will. Not even the big three, on their own, are enough to secure such outcomes. Starting today, the morning after Berlin, we have to explore how Italy, Spain, Poland, the Netherlands and other member states can be directly involved in setting the strategic directions for Europe. That means a lot of bureaucratic legwork, emails, conference calls, and probably more mini-summits, bilateral, trilateral, quad, quint or even sext. None of this should result in an institutional hard core, which would be the fastest way to split Europe, not unite it. But it would be a great deal more than the re-branded Michael Howard's multi-directional, hang-loose, everyone-does-their-own-thing recipe for European chaos.

Essentially, it would mean that a group of European states brought to that conference table in Brussels strategic proposals for dealing with a particular area. The group would vary from issue to issue; it would usually include France, Germany and Britain, but the larger the better. There would be no question of any such group deciding for others in advance. If the issue were subject to qualified majority voting, and the group had assembled the necessary majority, they might be confident of getting it through; but even then, it would have to be agreed round the council table. That's normal democratic politics. Other proposals would come from the commission and, directly or indirectly, from the European parliament. On big issues, not subject to majority voting, even smaller states would be able to say no: not one for all but one against all. Poland is demonstrating that just now over voting weights in the new constitution, magnificently if not wisely, before it has even become a full member of the union. Would this method work? Only ponderously. But if you can find a better one, capable of commanding the assent of the governments and peoples of Europe, I'd like to hear about it.

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