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Europe

Obscure clarity

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THE European Union's intergovernmental summit, held in the Brussels suburb of Laeken on December 14-15, 2001 did not mince its words.

The "democratic deficit" has been replaced by the "democratic challenge". Tony Blair fought successfully to have references to "harmonization" replaced by 'coordination". A "declaration" was agreed, but the essential issues have not been resolved.

When will the Union be enlarged and who will be involved? That was the first big issue dividing those who did not want to make any firm commitment, those who supported a "big bang" (everybody together) and those who supported the proposals of the commission, to exclude Rumania and Bulgaria (the poorest of the candidate countries) for the time being. What does the "declaration" have to say about this? "The Union is about to expand to bring in more than ten new Member States, predominantly Central and Eastern European"... Such obscure clarity!

The EU, the declaration tells us, faces "twin challenges, one within and the other beyond its borders". The internal challenge is the institutional question: who decides what in this Union? A "convention" has been set up. For French commissioner Michel Barnier this represents 'real democratic progress" in that the EU governments will not be the only bodies represented; they will be joined by two people from each national parliament and 16 members of the European Parliament.

Nonetheless, at the end of the day the convention can only (after consulting the representatives (?) of "civil society") pass on the results of its labours to the governments. The latter will then, as with all preceding treaties, decide alone in the framework of the inter-governmental conference on the "future of Europe". And what the governments decide must be ratified. When a country does not ratify (like Ireland or Denmark), the vote is taken again until the right decision is made.

As for the challenge to the EU "from beyond its borders", all was going well, the declaration tells us, until September 11. The "anti-terrorist struggle" will undoubtedly lead to an acceleration of the construction of fortress Schengen. But when it comes to the "sovereign" rights of states to send troops, the EU's big powers prefer to have sole control - there will be no "EU force" in Afghanistan.