

Common home

Ken Coates

Ken Coates was first elected Member of the European Parliament for Nottingham in 1989 and he served two terms, finishing in 1999. Previously, he had been unsuccessful as the Labour Party candidate in 1984, and in 1983, when he stood for Westminster in the Nottingham South constituency. Throughout the 1980s, he argued for European Nuclear Disarmament, and the creation of nuclear-weapons-free zones. This campaign achieved some success, with the removal and banning of intermediate-range nuclear forces under the INF Treaty of 1987, signed by Presidents Gorbachev and Reagan. But the political developments to safeguard Europe from future conflicts remained unaccomplished. With this in mind, and in the context of President Gorbachev's call for a 'common European home', Ken Coates explained why the European Parliament should meet the Supreme Soviet. This audacious proposal to unite East and West, which resonates strongly during current bloody confrontations, was set out in the first issue European Labour Forum, a journal which he founded and edited in 1990.

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Every new day creates unforeseen choices for Europe. In both its Eastern and Western halves, our continent is becoming familiar with a new dimension of crisis. We are informed that when the Chinese write this word, they combine two other ideographs. 'Crisis', thus, contains in itself the concept of 'danger', but also that of 'opportunity'.

Understanding the danger, this complex combination explains why I proposed, six months ago, to try to make an opportunity.

My suggestion was that the two largest emerging democracies of East and West should arrange a suitable meeting. Separately, they were doing similar things. The European Parliament was seeking to prepare a democratic foundation for political union, at the same time that the Supreme Soviet considered how to lay out the groundwork for political pluralism and the rule of law. Each of us, I thought, had something to say to the other. We could help one another. Together, we might build more surely than we could apart. Even if they rejected the notion of 'common home', surely, I thought, colleagues might see advantage in ensuring that the structure we were seeking to erect could be safer if it were at least semi-detached! And if we talked, might we not see how to improve the architecture? In My Father's House are many mansions ...

A mark of the speed of change is that the frank expression of disbelief, which often came across the faces of those who heard this proposal when first I made it, is now seldom seen. In the beginning perhaps half of my Western interlocutors thought I was crazy. Now, that number is well down. Of course, in truth, the hope for genuine European unity may really be crazy, but if it is, then we must at least observe that the world is going with it. In short order, first Poland, then Hungary, then the German Democratic Republic and Bulgaria, then Czechoslovakia and, latest, Romania, all embarked on the search for new political frameworks. Are they to be forever separate?

Some of the people who sought to dissuade us from any joint Parliamentary exchange with the Soviets were arguing, only a month or two ago, that the European Parliament should only meet with fully pluralist legislatures, and that Article Six of the Soviet Constitution precludes the development of any such openness. But now Article Six is on its way out. No one can be certain of continuity in any political process, as present events certainly argue. But how much further evidence is required before we open our eyes to what is happening? We have one sign after another, following so fast that one has to run to see them all: what new doubts can be invented to justify repudiation of what all of us know to be true? The present Soviet administration is trying to introduce major democratic reforms. It may be frustrated in the effort, but that effort is real. If we could help it, would we not be insane to refrain?

Another argument in Strasbourg was, initially, that perhaps it might be inconvenient to our Soviet partners to join in such a collaboration as that proposed. Then Mr Schevardnadze visited us, and said he would be willing to be present at a joint meeting. I visited Mr Zagladin, shortly afterwards, and he offered a careful four-point programme of stages for its realisation.

On my return I briefed Mr Vinci, the European Parliament's Secretary-General, on this conversation. He received the information with great interest, and was obviously intrigued by it. How is it possible still to argue that the project is too difficult, too uncertain, too expensive?

The original proposal suggested that preparations be undertaken by joint Committee sessions, pairing off the appropriate bodies of both Parliaments. If the preparatory work took two years, perhaps each joint Committee would meet twice, once in Brussels and once in Moscow. If appropriate, smaller subgroups might deal with specific problems. Some agreements, for ratification in joint plenum, would be easy to reach: exchanges of documents, information, trainees, for instance. Others could be more difficult.

But inter-committee collaboration is a functional exercise, and the Committees of both Parliaments are well-used to methodical and efficient work. It would not be beyond their powers to determine what could appropriately be tabled on their joint agenda. Some Committees have more to learn from one another than others. Some are already involved in overtures, one to another. None of this framework of activity involves superhuman fears of organisations, funding, or control.

A joint plenary might be slightly more difficult. However, using our powers of improvisation, it could be arranged at Strasbourg, or in any one of a dozen European cities. Whilst the costs would not be negligible, they would certainly be rapidly outweighed by the benefits.

What, in fact, could be done by joint East-West action, to resolve present problems?

The first phase of crisis, in Eastern Europe and the USSR, involves the political collapse of authoritarian systems, and the difficult search for democratic renewal. It has provoked, and is partially reinforced by, national tensions and economic imbalances. At another level, indebtedness aggravates social distress to a point which drives national differences beyond democratic resolution, into xenophobia. Without economic co-operation on a large scale, we risk the disaggregation of societies whose economies are falling down.

A deeper crisis is all too likely to arrive. The global disproportions between rich and poor nations have developed an unbelievable pattern of debt. The United States, which, after the Second World War, was powerful enough to initiate the Marshall Plan for European Recovery, and to impose the dollar as an international currency, is, today, the world's largest debtor nation. The potent Japanese economy operates on a global scale, but has not generated political institutions which can think globally, or any other

than the defensive plan. More precisely, Japanese investors can go anywhere to close a barrier or make a space: but overall economic policy is reactive, not initiative. In the European Community there could, perhaps, arise a group of statesman with the vision and the skill to convene a new Bretton Woods conference, to tackle the problems involved in creating a new international economic order, a new world currency, and effective measures to unravel the bonds of debt. Would this not be easier with the help of the Soviet Union?

Superimposed on any Western economic crisis will be the problems of disarmament and development. If economic activity is not reoriented, disarmament will contribute to the circle of decline and contraction. If world trade is about to enter a phase of stringent compression, we may well be standing on the brink of trade wars. Less propitious conditions for major democratic reforms could scarcely be envisaged. The common sense answer speaks of converting military investments to civilian purposes. But then, common sense finds the notion of economic crisis difficult to comprehend ...

It may be that current falls in commodity prices are only a 'blip'. It may be that pessimism about the Western economies is unfounded. In such a case, the arguments for joint efforts towards democracy, East and West, would stand or fall solely on their political merit. Is it not sensible, when one is embarking on a road of reform, to go along together? In which ways, by what devices, might we help one another? Are there any reasons which would justify ignoring each other's efforts, or even, undermining them? Should we listen to such reasons for *raisons d'état*, or discount them as immoral?

Perhaps, though, the economic wolf is really at our doors. If he is, co-operation takes on a special urgency.

The new global framework is unlikely to function if it is directed against a particular interest, to benefit a section of mankind. If we found how to redistribute resources in order to expand circulation, encourage sustainable development, focus resources to undo environmental damage, and open a total war on poverty, would this not also benefit the richest nations?

This seems to me to be the agenda of the 'common home'. Others might have a broader vision. Not the least of the virtues of the proposal for a joint meeting between the European Parliament and the Supreme Soviet lies in the fact that it stimulates people to enquire, what might this agenda be?

These plans collapsed with the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, although the need for co-operation in our common European home did not.