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INTERPRETING EU EDUCATION AND TRAINING POLICY: THOUGHTS FROM THE ENGLISH PERSPECTIVE

'[The Englishman] is too often educated to regard Europe as an over-large, polyglot, ill-tempered country lying to the east and south of England' (G.D.H. Cole, 1933, p. 22).

MIXED MESSAGES

'Cresson sinks the Commission'
Headline, *Libération*, 16 March 1999

In March 1999 the European Union faced what was arguably its biggest crisis since the establishment of the European Economic Community in 1957. After months of criticism of several Commissioners by factions of the European Parliament for their failure to deal with, or accept responsibility for, supposedly corrupt practices, all twenty Commissioners - including the President, Jacques Santer - resigned. For a while, the EU was effectively leaderless, though the Commissioners continued at their desks until such time as the Council of Ministers could decide on its response. That came quickly. On 24 March it was announced - following a special summit meeting of heads of government in Berlin - that Romano Prodi, the widely respected former Prime Minister of Italy, would be Santer's successor as EU President.

The resignation of the Commission *en masse* followed the publication of a damning report into its work by an independent committee of 'wise people' appointed by the Commission itself to investigate the charges being made against it. The report (Commission of the European Union, 1999) was particularly critical of Edith Cresson, one-time French Minister of European Affairs and (1991-92) Prime Minister of France; her resignation at an earlier point, it was widely argued, might have prevented the mass resignation.

Within the Commission Cresson headed Directorate-General XXII, responsible for 'Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth'. Among the programmes under her aegis was LEONARDO DA VINCI, singled out by the independent committee for evidence of particular mismanagement. Mme Cresson eventually indicated that she would not seek reappointment, the view of most observers being that she decided to jump before she was pushed.

The crisis of March 1999 confirmed the worst fears of critics of the European Union. Public opinion polls on the EU have frequently shown high degrees of doubt and uncertainty about or indifference to its activities. The 'Eurobarometer' findings of July 2000, for example, showed 49% holding a favourable opinion of their country's EU membership, with 14% opposed and 28% having a neutral view. Strongest support was found in Ireland, Luxembourg and The Netherlands, with the lowest support evident in the United Kingdom, Austria, and Sweden, and identification of a 'general downward trend in levels of support for the EU in most Member States'. On a positive note, the findings suggested that 47% of those surveyed felt that their country was benefiting from EU membership. While 45% had confidence in the Commission, 30% showed mistrust: in the UK confidence was shown by only 25% of the population surveyed (Eurobarometer 53, 2000). In the European elections of June 1999 there was recorded one of the lowest turn-outs ever. In the UK fewer than one in four people bothered to vote.

The new Commission was confirmed in office in September 1999. Jacques Santer had meanwhile been elected to serve as an MEP, and several members of the old Commission were reappointed, among them the British Commissioner and former leader of the Labour Party, Neil Kinnock, who now became Vice-President.

This series of blows to the EU and its credibility as an institution within the Member States came as no great surprise, since scepticism about 'Europe' abounds. The term 'Eurosceptic', indeed, is now part of the language. The Eurosceptics were to experience another victory in September 2000, when the Danes voted in a referendum by 53.2% to 46.8% not to adopt the euro, thus throwing into some confusion the notion of a Community unifiable in due course at least by a common currency: there was to be a two-tier Europe, and it could no longer be argued with confidence in the United Kingdom that *not* adopting the euro – should that eventually be the decision of the nation through a referendum – would cause the country to be isolated in Europe.

It would, of course, be quite remarkable if fifteen countries were always able to reach agreement on the important issues which confront them: they will see even their own joint agreements in fifteen different ways. The Member States are unified by diversity and divided by their desire for unity. Interpretation is all important.

EU POLICY AND THE PARTICULARITY OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

The English feel that they 'are not really part of Europe'
Anthony Sampson, 1968, p. 3

The parameters of the Oxford part of the PRESTIGE project have been described in Phillips & Economou (1999), Ertl (2000) and Ertl & Phillips (2000). We have been concerned to investigate the formulation, interpretation, transmission and implementation of the education and training policy of the European Union as it is manifest in four Member States: France, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

The particular focus of the Oxford team's work has been on the 'European dimension' in education and on aspects of the LEONARDO DA VINCI and SOCRATES programmes.

The PRESTIGE project has been essentially concerned with the tensions between the imperative for standardisation inherent in the globalising tendencies which can be felt in educational policy at all levels, and the desire to preserve the autonomy and traditions of individual nations. The European Union of course, while aiming at economic and political unity, allows the principle of subsidiarity in education and training effectively to the extent of envisaging that its policies might be ignored altogether. Article 126 of the Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty) is worth quoting in full (Article 127, on training, follows much the same lines):

1. The Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging co-operation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content, teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.

2. Community action shall be aimed at:

- developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States;
- encouraging mobility of students and teachers, *inter alia* by encouraging the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study;
- promoting co-operation between educational establishments;
- developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the member States;
- encouraging the development of youth exchanges and of exchanges of socio-educational instructors;
- encouraging the development of distance education.

3. The Community and the Member States shall foster cooperation with third countries and the competent international organizations in the sphere of education, in particular the Council of Europe.

4. In order to contribute to the achievement of the objectives referred to in this Article, the Council:

- acting in accordance with the procedure referred to in Article 189b, after consulting the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, shall adopt incentive measures, excluding any harmonization of the laws and regulations of the Member States;
- acting by qualified majority on a proposal from the Commission, shall adopt recommendations (The Treaty on European Union, quoted from Rudden & Wyatt, eds., 1973, p. 92).

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