

Fishing for Europe

Joschka Fischer: Rethinking the EU

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In America, Green Party politicians generally struggle just to get noticed. In Germany, a Green is running the foreign ministry and raising eyebrows all over Europe. Joschka Fischer holds one of the top cabinet posts in the German government and happens to be hugely popular, so he doesn't have to fight for attention. Now, he is looking for stature, and he's gaining it with a proposal to overhaul Europe's basic institutional architecture.

Just eighteen months into his job as foreign minister, Fischer caught everyone off guard last May when he turned up at Berlin's Humboldt University and delivered a speech suggesting the European Union be radically reformed. What he proposed was nothing less than a European federation with a constitution, a two-chamber parliament, and a directly elected president. No half-hearted measures here. Fischer's speech was a fast-forward, cut-to-the-chase action plan for coping with the task of European expansion.

In Fischer's view, coordinating EU enlargement and integration constitutes "the biggest challenge the Union has faced since its creation." The EU's governmental structures--originally conceived to serve just six members--are no longer up to the task, claimed Fischer. They "just about still function" with fifteen member states, he said. He asserted that further expansion could jeopardize the Union's ability to act. In the absence of sweeping institutional reforms, Fischer said he could not imagine how the EU can absorb a dozen or more new members over the next decade and remain effective.

Fischer's proposed remedy is not to halt expansion. Indeed, he considers enlargement essential to the preservation of peace in Europe. He suggests that a core group of European states--above all Germany and France--move toward closer political integration and establish a federal framework capable of accommodating the numerous EU candidate countries.

The structures Fischer proposes would be immediately familiar to most Americans. The federation's executive body, for example, could feature a directly elected president with far-ranging powers. (The alternative would be to turn the European Council into a European government.) On the legislative side, Fischer foresees a parliament with two chambers, one of which could be modeled on the US Senate with directly elected representatives from individual states. Members of the second chamber would be drawn from the various national parliaments. Anchoring all of this would be a rock-solid constitution to replace the various "treaties" and "agreements" that currently give the European Union its legal foundation. In spite of these American parallels, Fischer prudently avoided referring to the proposed federation as a "United States of Europe."

As Germany's chief foreign policy spokesman, Fischer could not afford to offend his EU partners' national sensibilities. Which is why he presented himself at Humboldt University as an intellectual instead of a diplomat, insisting he was not delivering his speech in his capacity as foreign minister. In a nod of deference to France, the Green Party's leading light went out

of his way to link his proposals to ideas posited fifty years ago by the French statesman Robert Schuman.

Awareness that the next set of states could join the EU as early as 2003 should help force discussion on Schuman and Fischer's federal model. The intervening years will be crucial in determining whether federalism in Europe is ever to move beyond the province of "personal vision."

Terry Martin, a frequent EUROPE contributor based in Berlin, reported on Fischer.

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