WHAT ARE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS FOR?

Speaking Notes for Alyson JK Bailes, Helsinki, 7 February 2008

Europe has institutions in the way that a dog has fleas. They are all over the place, it's hard to forget that they're there, and sometime they bite you when you're least expecting it. They also have a hierarchy of their own, with little fleas sitting on the back of big fleas and strong fleas eating weaker fleas and so on. The sharpest point of the comparison is perhaps that, just as fleas live on our blood, the European institutions only exist thanks to the people we send to work in them and the tax money we contribute to them and the millions or perhaps billions of work hours that we have to put into all their different activities.

That being so, it's surprising that we don't give more serious and permanent thought than we do to the question of what these institutions are for, and above all how they relate to our own national and individual purposes. It's true that a great deal of good work is done by academics on the relations between states and governments and these institutions, and there are also some theories ('social constructivism') that look at the dynamics of institutions as a kind of political animal or community in themselves. But one approach that I find missing - although I'll be very glad if someone can direct me afterwards to a good book on it! – is what I would call the *psychology* of the way we make and use and feel about our institutions and in particular, the question of why that psychology so often seems pathological. Why do we so often hate what we love and love what we hate, in NATO or the EU for instance? Why do politicians love to blame 'Brussels' for things that they have gone to Brussels to decide and have authorized Brussels to carry out? Why will a foreign ministry in London or Paris or in Warsaw for that matter send instructions to its mission at NATO and another set of instructions to its mission at the EU that completely contradict the first set?

In a recent talk I tried to explain that last point by saying that many European nations are themselves schizophrenic in their thinking particularly about the external world and security, and that they play out that schizophrenia by using the different Brussels institutions a bit like Punch and Judy puppets. But today I would like to make another and more serious attempt at answering the question: in a way that does justice to our better nature as well as our worst behaviour, as European citizens and as participants in the world's greatest ever experiment in institutionalized integration.

If we put traditional international relations theory aside for a moment – and that's easier for me because I don't know anything about it – I would suggest that there are three fundamental reasons, conscious or unconscious, why Europeans like you or me build institutions and have built so many of them:

- a feeling of want or need or insufficiency
- a wish to transform ourselves
- and a wish to transform others, including our neighbours, Europe, and perhaps even the world as a whole.

The trouble is that each of these motives holds its own contradictions, that the combination of them is different from country to country, and that it is not stable in a given country over time.

The psychology of want and need as an institution building force is perhaps easiest to understand. The selfish drive for security and protection, wealth or prestige is strong enough to explain why nations will pay a high price for such things also in terms of compromising with other nations and losing some of their sovereignty. Two kinds of need have played a particularly strong role in the story of European institutions: members' need to get something from each other, and their need for a guaranteed common front to get something that they want or avoid something they don't want from the world outside. Thus in the very simplest terms, we could say that after the Second World War:

- West Europeans had a need for American protection against the Communist bloc and created NATO to get it, both for NATO members in and practice for non-members too
- All Europeans had a need to avoid actual military conflict and to stabilize relations within the continent, so they gave NATO its 'soft' side as a promoter of disarmament and détente and also created the OSCE to build bridges across the East-West division
- To support these security policies and also as and end in itself West Europeans needed economic growth, reconstruction and the reduction of the worst economic inequalities, so they created the original European Communities to establish both the economic and the political conditions for those things - thereby also meeting a need for greater negotiating strength against the rest of the world.

The strong and simple motivation of want and need is, however, also perhaps the least stable of the forces at work because

- As the ancient philosophers knew, sometimes the worst thing in life is to get what you want;
- What people think they want is not always what they need;
- The list and the priorities of needs can change quite fast over time under both internal and external pressures; and
- The ability of a particular institution to meet people's wants and needs also changes for similar reasons.

Thus if I take just the one obvious case of NATO, it was in real danger after 1990 when it had effectively won the Cold War and most of the services and tools it provided were no longer relevant to the new landscape. Fortunately, it was able to adapt itself to meet three new sets of needs at different times: the need for high-quality military conflict management operations within Europe, the need to stabilize Central Europe through enlargement, and most recently the need to carry out peace missions in other continents in the service of the new security priorities established after '9/11'. However, over that period NATO has sometimes offered to fill other needs and been rejected, like when the other Allies offered the US direct support on 12 September 2001. And the overall balance of the way Europeans meet their security needs is slowly tilting against NATO, because the EU is clearly more suitable for doing 90% of what needs to be done against terrorism and proliferation, and all of what need to be done in this region on bird flu or climate change or energy policy, and even has its own instruments now for a certain very relevant range of peace missions.

An even more serious and subtle problem is that if we asked which needs are closest to our basic selfish priorities of survival, in other words which institution is doing things directly related to what is now most likely to kill you or me, it would be very hard to say in all truth that NATO actions in Afghanistan or Kashmir or Darfur are meeting that criterion. Perhaps recent Russian behaviour will swing things back again by reminding us that we do need NATO's strategic protection for our own lands and our own skins, and we need it also to be a partner in disarmament and tension-reducing measures with Russia and its close friends or what we could call the 'new East'. But precisely because NATO has now changed its clothes so many times, the fabric of collective defence looks dangerously thin to me these days and the Alliance's arms control and disarmament policy is frankly in rags.

And yet…I find that both in myself and in most people I speak to, the motivation to preserve NATO is quite strong for reasons probably connected deep down with the second institution-building force, that is the *drive of nations and peoples to transform themselves*. Again this can take different forms based on different motives:

- the desire to escape past guilt and throw off a negative or unhappy identity;
- the opposite which is the desire to raise something valuable in ourselves to a higher level, to crystallize and guarantee it for the longest possible future;
- or the wish to join in a collective identity that has some attributes we could never have on our own, such a different level of prestige and a model function, or capabilities that are bigger than just the total of its parts and that help for instance in international competition, survival and adaptation to change.

NATO when it was created had all three of those transforming functions: it made German and Italy respectable defence powers again (and later guaranteed the permanent move to democracy in Portugal, Spain and Greece); it guaranteed the national integrity and values of smaller countries like Belgium and Denmark as nothing previously in history has managed to do; and it did have the collective identity of a unique community of democracies with a mystique that has not entirely faded today. Looking at it more in psychological terms, it took the aggressive nationalism out of military affairs and thus guaranteed peace among its own members, but signing up to the Washington Treaty also meant giving up any idea of selfishness, passivity and indifference to the fate of one's neighbour. Of course, the creation of what later became the European Union had much the same motives and effects in the non-military field, and the Council of Europe comes into this picture as an enterprise dedicated especially to the second aim, the crystallizing and preservation of distinctly European positive values. You could also say that the 'Helsinki process' of the CSCE/OSCE worked because it reflected certain hopes and visions of self-improvement that were common both to Western and Eastern Europeans (as well as the neutrals and non-aligned), and that it created its own kind of community based on coexistence, non-aggression, and the recognition of human rights that transcend all political systems.

In all these forms, the urge for self-transformation is quite a reliable basis for institution building because if it succeeds, the institution becomes an indispensable part of our new self as a person may come to rely on spectacles or a pacemaker. The institution meanwhile continues to transform us in ways we may not have originally thought of or intended, as shown for instance by the academic studies of 'Europeanization' in EU elites and in business and social circles. But identity politics has its dark side as we all know, and transformation is not a single one-off deal after which we can afford to relax. National instincts and psychologies are much slower to change than institutional forms and policy vocabularies, and transformation notoriously goes quicker and deeper in some parts of national populations than in others. Meanwhile, the original guilt or fear or idealism that drove the wish for transformation itself can weaken or be forgotten. The net result seems to be that each time an institution needs to take its collective transformation one step further, whether it be through 'widening' like enlargement or deepening in the sense of closer integration and greater central capacities, the will and consent for the resulting transformations of national life and identity has to be built all over again. And one implication of that is that we can never rely on the original group of countries who transformed themselves into a community still being the right group to carry through some further stage of transformation. To go back to the first motive I mentioned, their *needs* may no longer coincide in a new strategic environment, and those parts of their national instincts that have not been harmonized and bred out of them may point in different directions. You are probably thinking of the example of the EU, and the well-known debates each time we come to a major step forward over whether a small core group of the most motivated states may have to go forward alone. But you could equally tell the story of NATO since 9/11 in comparable language: the US resented that many other allies would not join it in transforming Western defence into a war again terrorism, while many allies felt Washington was moving away from some of the Alliance's original common values, and the institutional transformation that everybody did agree on – making NATO a military provider for large remote peace missions – is still (we would have to say) pretty fragile in terms especially of national political acceptance.

In general, however, a community is often best held together by a common purpose towards outsiders: and we should finally review the motivation to build institutions that have an effect in *transforming their close neighbours, or their relations with other large powers*, or that even have a measurable impact in *changing the state of the world*. Only two European institutions, NATO and the EU, have been designed to play these roles *inter alia*, and they have only really developed their external transformative effects on any large scale since the end of the Cold War. In terms of transforming their neighbours their greatest achievement has been their own enlargement to take in 10 and 15 new members respectively in less than 15 years, with at least a few more (in the Balkans) almost certainly still to be added. That process has of course led to some difficult debates over whether enlargement meets important enough needs for the original members to be worth the costs, and whether all the countries involved are actually being fully enough transformed to meet whatever we think of as our original group identity, and how many further 'transformable' countries are still left.

In terms of transforming other large powers and relationships, I am tempted to say that neither NATO nor the EU has been very successful in this vis-à-vis Russia, and that the reasons for this failing may include that fact that we just haven't been frightened enough of Moscow for most of the post-Cold War period – i.e. the psychological *need* wasn't strong enough – plus the fact that our non-transformed national instincts are still very divergent on the question of exactly what Russia is to us in the 21st century and what we would like it to be. Finally, in terms of transforming the world I must (for lack of time) just make the blunt statement that the EU has far more power to do it than NATO, not just because it is a truly global player in dimensions like trade and finance, development or climate change, but also because it has so many imitators (and an increasing number of quite successful ones) in other regions. NATO of course has some good friends in other continents, but the only group imitating it *as an institution* is the not very friendly one of the Collective Security Treaty Organization led by Russia.

So far, so academic: but does any of this tell us anything useful about our national and individual concerns in the real world, here and now? The strongest lesson I would myself draw from telling the story of Europe and its institutions in these terms is that the institutions are there to serve Europeans, not Europeans to serve the institutions. Understanding the instrumental and relative nature of our own institutional creations can help us avoid a lot of unnecessary frustrations and wrong solutions, because it helps to make sure that we:

- do not take these institutions for granted as something natural and inevitable, and appreciate better the unique things they have achieved;
- do not idealize them or expect more from them than they can give;
- conversely, do not waste our breath blaming an institution as such, because any psychologist could tell us that we are then just indulging in the 'transference' of our own problems and frustrations and running away from our own responsibilities;
- do not use the different institutions in a way that drives them into destructive competition with each other and makes them (as the saying goes) interblocking rather than interlocking;
- but on the other, hand, do let them engage in productive competition when such competition and experiment can help us (by a kind of Darwinian process) to work out which institutions or institutions are best fitted to help us with our newest challenges or to achieve our latest dreams, and which ones we could let quietly die away without unnecessary shame.

On a perhaps more sensitive point, I would suggest that a nation thinking of joining an institution or making another big change in its relationship might do well to ask itself about the balance of its motives and the sufficiency of its motives under the three headings I have defined here. For instance, when Finland joined the EU there were both economic and strategic *needs* at play, and I believe the second kind of *self-transformation* took place that I was talking about in the sense of guaranteeing and making permanent Finland's democratic European identity as well as its independent nationhood.

I don‘t think the desire to *transform others* was as much as part of the national recipe as it was for instance for my own country when it joined – indeed, in parenthesis, I would argue that both Britain and France have permanent problems with Europe because both of them see it far more as a way to transform others than to transform themselves! But Finland has of course tried to achieve more than average influence over the way the EU impacts upon its Eastern neighbourhood, and it has played a part it probably didn't expect to play in some major collective transformations such as the creation of the EU's first ever Security and Defence Policy. I know there is a lot of debate here now about joining NATO, and I wonder what answers you would get if you asked the corresponding questions:
What needs would Finland hope to satisfy by joining, and could NATO in its present state actually satisfy them?
In what further and positive ways would Alliance membership transform Finland itself?
And what if any effect would there be in transforming NATO's neighbourhood and further enlargement, its relations with other powers and its profile and action in the wider world?

Whatever the answers may be, I'd like to end here by highlighting two aspects of national institutions that I think are very important for handling such momentous questions in the right way. First – and not by coincidence – let me mention the role of parliaments. When we have transformed ourselves to create a new institution above national level and then transformed that institution and its whole environment further, not once but several times, we may occasionally have nasty doubts about whether our name is Frankenstein and whether we can actually still control what we have created. I for one believe that European citizens and their leaders are not fully aware of or in control of the present and future strategic destiny of the EU, and the more our Union expands and the more the American strategic presence in Europe is reduced the more worried I personally get about the gap between the responsibilities we have created for ourselves, our willingness to face up to them and our ability to bear them successfully. At the same time it is notorious that the transformation of government business through the EU has not gone hand in hand with the creation of an equally strong new mode of democratic control, whether working through the European Parliament or anything else; nor indeed has it created an appropriate new version of party politics that would really work at the European level. This puts a special burden on national parliaments because they have to fulfil their traditional role within the nation, including helping to control the nation's relations with the European Union as a separate entity; but at the same time they have to provide some of the democratic mentoring and the creative political drive that are vital for the new entity itself – if it is truly to meet our needs, and if it is to faithfully represent the better parts of ourselves that we have tried to put into it, and if it is to be truly a positive force and model for the transformation of our world. I know Finns do not believe in flattery so let me just say that I do not think the Eduskunta is the worst in Europe at that task.

Last but not least, you are doing a wise thing by strengthening your capacity for independent intellectual work on international affairs, on security affairs and on the EU itself through the creation of this new UPI. Purely academic research and teaching on Europe is essential, not least for the training and inspiration of new generations. New political thinking and advice such as advisers within ministries, parliament and political parties provide is essential to keep that living political link between national populations, national governments and what happens in Brussels. But something in between is also vital and that something is what can be provided, both for political elites and a larger public and indeed for the whole of Europe, by an independent policy-oriented think-tank such as you are creating (or more precisely, recreating) here today. Even if my eyes go green with envy at the thought of the resources and possibilities that UPI will now enjoy, I have been enough of a friend to UPI and to Finland for at least 20 years now to be able to say with all sincerity that I congratulate UPI itself, the Eduskunta, and the Finnish people on this initiative. I truly wish that it will bring you all that you hope for, and as a European I hope it will achieve all that it has the power to achieve for Europe and the world as a whole.