Prologue
After the Storm?

in After the Storm. How to save democracy in Europe

“Toute société qui n’est pas éclairée par des philosophes”, wrote the Marquis de Condorcet, est trompée par des charlatans.”1 Perhaps the president of the European Council had something like this bold statement in mind when he told us he wanted to meet European thinkers. Thinkers. Not think tankers. Not experts. Not scholars with the European Union as their field of research. Nor politicians or lobbyists, however clever and well informed, whom he had plenty of opportunities to meet.

This was mid-2012, about halfway through Herman Van Rompuy’s five-year tenure as president of the European Council, and he wanted to meet thinkers who could help him think beyond the storm in which his presidency turned out to be embroiled, to help him think about Europe’s destiny. He therefore asked us to select a handful of them, sufficiently diverse, sufficiently likely to tell him something he had not heard before, sufficiently capable of making him see something he had not seen before. So we did.

The people we invited were not all professional philosophers, but all of them were the sort of people Condorcet must have had in mind. People who are able and feel entitled, indeed duty-bound, to look ahead and think beyond their discipline, and thereby to shed light on the current predicament and future prospects of our European Union.

The outcome was a sequence of frank, lively, instructive encounters in Brussels. The guest thinkers expressed their fears and their hopes, and some convictions that those in power usually prefer not to hear. In return, the President, an economist and philosopher by training, quizzed and challenged them in the light of his own deep convictions and everyday experience.

About half of the contributions to the present volume are short essays in which participants in these encounters express somewhat more systematically the insights they tried to convey while in Brussels. For a number of different reasons, some of the participants in the meetings could not contribute an essay. Instead, we asked for contributions from a handful of other “thinkers”, some of whom Herman Van Rompuy had met in a different context.

This set of contributions, quite diverse in substance and tone, sometimes gloomy, often concerned, always frank, is preceded by a longer essay that encapsulates what Herman Van Rompuy himself has learned from these encounters and above all from his experience as European Council President. It is followed by two concluding pieces in which we each express our own respective views about the future of democracy in the European Union.

The title of this volume is meant to suggest that it forms some sort of sequel to Europe in the Storm, the book published by Herman Van Rompuy in his last year as

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1 “Any society that is not enlightened by philosophers is deceived by charlatans” (Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, “Prospectus” [1793], quoted in Elisabeth and Robert Badinter, Condorcet. Un intellectuel en politique. Paris: Fayard, 1988, p.9.)
president of the European Council. We could probably have picked something less foolhardy than “After the storm”. But whether in the literal or in the metaphorical sense, using that expression does not prevent one from believing — as we do — that there are many more storms to come. Whether the present period is best seen as an interval between two European storms or as a lull in a particularly long one, the future will tell.

This future, however, is in our hands. The contributors to this book disagree on many issues, but they do share at least this conviction: political action does matter. Whether storms can be prevented or tamed depends on the leaders we choose and ultimately on us all European citizens. But how successful we shall be also depends on our ability to identify the nature of the most fundamental challenges we face and to work out the best ways to address them. Contributing to this task is the immodest ambition of this small volume.

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