

Pontignano 2017: Liberalism in crisis?

Responding to a social and technological revolution

The 25th edition of the Pontignano Conference this year is a landmark; an opportunity to reflect on the past and to look ahead to the next 25 years. We need to be ambitious and confident. What is the relevance of the UK-Italy relationship? What should it look like in 10 years' time? What aspects should go forward, and what needs to change? How it can be leveraged to steer Europe towards a more secure and prosperous future? What are the new bridges and bonds needed to protect the relationship, our shared values, and our cultural heritage?

Since the last edition, the crisis facing our liberal economies has deepened, and the shift in attitudes signalled by the rise of populist politics has been put into sharp relief - as reflected in the US election and the fallout from Brexit. The political and social infrastructure continues to struggle with the economic stresses of the Eurozone and the pressures of migration. These factors and many others combine to pose a new challenge to the '*liberal project*', which the Pontignano concept embodied from its beginning 25 years ago when it was founded by the British Council with Ralph Dahrendorf and Giuliano Amato as the first co-Chairs.

Pontignano 2017 offers an important opportunity to reflect and work together to identify innovative solutions. We must draw on our shared European cultural and intellectual resources to address the challenges and remain relevant. The bilateral relationship becomes ever-more important in this context; the UK remains a key link between Europe, the US and the Commonwealth countries, while Italy is a core EU partner as well as an enlightened global player. We are uniquely placed to build those bridges and keep wider European relationships on a positive trajectory whilst upholding the fundamental aspects of the European project - our collective democracy, freedom of speech, security, enlightened education, and celebration of diversity.

Sub-themes:

1) Brexit: implications for the UK, Italy & the EU

With exit negotiations well underway, the 'influencing agenda' will take centre place. Much work has already been done but the stakes will be clearer and the terrain better-defined. Pundits predict an economic disaster in the event of a 'hard' Brexit; there is the renewed threat of a break-up of the Union, and the reintroduction of a divisive border in Ireland. There continues to be lively disagreement about Britain's prospects outside the EU and what kind of economic model Britain should follow. What will the situation look like come 2019, and what can be done to influence the process for an optimal outcome?

2) Higher education, mobility, research and technology. Are we offering a fair deal to the young?

The UK General Election has highlighted that there are many dissatisfied young people - unhappy about Brexit; their student loans; and the difficulty of buying a house which we see in Italy too with young people struggling to move out of their parent's houses. Parallels between Corbyn's capacity to mobilise the youth vote in the UK and the engagement of young people in the rise of the Five Star movement in Italy has shifted the conversation: from the apathetic to the dissatisfied youth. Alongside this, we have the formerly immutable 'Ivory Tower' becoming more competitive, market orientated and diversified. Student and faculty mobility has been one of the major success stories of European project driving social and economic progress, i.e. Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020. The UK in particular has benefitted from an influx of European talent and Italy has had marked success in scientific leadership of major international projects as we see with the Large Hadron Collider. What impact will today's youth mobilisation have on the future? What does the future hold for universities and their research output, with or without Brexit? What are the priorities for investment and leadership?

3) Business: moving on, creating prosperity

Business leaders in Italy and the UK have been the first to accept the realities of change in Europe and are already moving on. Italian companies are eyeing gaps in supply that will be left by Brexit, and UK companies are adjusting to the prospect of operating outside the Single Market and the Customs Union. However, the dearth of innovative new businesses growing to significant scale is a problem across Europe and in our two countries. The Italian economy remains fragile, where youth unemployment has become chronic and the banking system a source of serious concern which needs to be more openly addressed. Where do social responsibility, diversity and transparency intersect with profitability and 'good' business? How can Italy and the UK emerge as leaders to turn around our economic fortunes?

4) Defence and security: addressing shifting threats and cyber security

The challenges to our collective security have multiplied and diversified. By the time we meet we will have seen whether the summer has brought more mass movement of people across the Mediterranean into Italy and what has been the international response. Whereas security threats once were external and readily identified, they are now often internal and invisible. Extremism and prosperity co-exist. Cyber tools and social media are new and powerful weapons for waging war by 'other means'. At the same time, the traditional military alliances which have underpinned the treasured post-war era of European peace are under question, with shades of the Cold War and a tech-driven arms race where everyone is a player. What are the real drivers behind the multiple global conflicts? Who is to lead the response if the US draws back? How can we maintain an effective European deterrence while finding the resource to tackle conflicts at source?