

## **THE XXII PONTIGNANO CONFERENCE**

**3-5 October 2014, La Certosa di Pontignano, Siena**

### **“Better together or better apart?” *Italian and British Views of Europe***

The Pontignano Conference in 2014 will take place in the wake of the European Elections, shortly after the UK's referendum on Scottish independence, and not long before national elections in the UK and, potentially, in Italy. These elections will likely be characterised by a common distrust for the established political parties, hostility to globalisation and immigration, a strong dislike for the EU and a disavowal of its current ambitions. Populist parties of the Right and Left, harnessing distrust and anger at the EU, are likely to be big winners in national and European elections, reflecting the changing traditional balance between the main parties in both Italy and the UK. The challenge for mainstream parties will be searching for answers on how to offer genuine reform so the EU can survive in a global economy, while responding to calls for a minimalist Europe.

Italy, UK and the EU are part of a global system that relies on economic growth continuing in the BRICs and sustained recovery in the USA. Potentially undermining the global economy, however, are instability and violence in Syria, the Arab world, and the Sahel; serious tensions in Europe over Ukraine; and mounting worries about East Asia – with the stand-off between Japan and China on top of dangers posed by a nuclear North Korea. It is up to the EU institutions to build on recent successes, demonstrate the capacity to play a more effective role on these broader challenges and convey the value of these accomplishments to the EU electorate.

The underlying challenges in Europe still remain however: demography, competitiveness, the north-south divide, the purposes, aims and relevance of the EU in the 21st century, the ability of Europe to play a security role regionally or globally, the collapse of trust in political and other institutions.

How do Italy and Britain believe that the European Union can help to deal with the problems that our nations face? What are their differing perspectives on the EU's present and future roles? Do they favour a looser EU or greater integration? What can they learn from each other?

Four areas of discussion will help Italy and the UK understand ‘whether the EU is ‘Better Together or Better Apart’, and how to remain economically and politically relevant in either scenario.

### **How can the EU be more competitive *and* more cohesive?**

Contracting demographics will multiply the current economic discontent of today's young and pose challenges for future welfare. Italy's population falls and ages, while Britain's rises and ages; yet both countries face big political issues caused by hostility to immigration. Some movements call for less immigration, in order to be more socially cohesive, even at the cost of economic growth; others underline how people flows keep the economy afloat. With free movement a core value of the EU, do member states prefer unity or separation? How does the EU help or hinder dealing with these challenges? Should the EU do more or less to make its members competitive *and* more socially cohesive?

### **How can the EU win the X-Factor?**

Far-right or populist parties pose a threat to European integration but the underlying sentiments fuelling these movements stem from the EU's lack of vision, or inability of those in power to inspire its people. Why has Europe lost its political brand appeal? Did it ever have one? What is the narrative that might inspire our voters and connect it with their aspirations and anxieties? Who articulates a sense today of what it means to be European?

### **How can the EU make its Governance fit for purpose?**

Declining electoral turnout points to disappointment at how the EU is run; and betrays voters' perception that the EU is in the hands of a self-serving elite. How the EU responds to this concern will determine whether these sentiments will result in attempts to reform power at EU level or to repatriate power to national level. Either way the EU needs to become seen as a source of solutions, not problems. Does its present governance widen or narrow the concern about a democratic deficit in our countries? Do our national parliaments need to be more involved in the governance of the EU? Or are there new and emerging systems of political participation and social innovation that will eclipse current institutional arrangements – both nationally and at EU level?

### **How can the EU command respect in the world?**

The EU regularly debates whether it needs, even in our national interests, to create a bigger impact. Are we prepared to undertake a larger role in guaranteeing global security – or should we limit ourselves to a narrower scope of action? Europe's ability to project hard power is famously limited – but does exist. Our soft power is much vaunted but the respect commanded by enlargement and policy prowess, such as on environment targets, is on the wane. If we want to project ourselves and have some results to be proud of, should we concentrate on our near neighbourhood? Where can we demonstrate leadership that can command the world's respect, and pride in ourselves as Europeans? Or will the EU's own democratic processes see 'disintegration' trump reform and would this undermine relevance of the EU in the world?