Brussels – Europe's beating heart

BRUSSELS. Guild-house façades and soaring neo-Gothic Town Hall peer down on beer-gardens, restaurant terraces, chocolate-makers, lace shops, and mesmerized strollers. Mozart bursts from hidden speakers at 10:30 p.m., hushing the crowds. Started almost 600 years ago, Brussels' Grand'Place awes, yet embraces you with the cosy charm and sensuality of Flanders. The little streets around it – Cheese Market St., Coal St., Butcher St.-- echo market-town harmonies. They make Brussels a capital for Europeans as well as Europe.

Brussels doesn't beat its chest like those preening giants Paris, London or Rome. It believes palaces alone don't make a Europe. Waffles, *moules frites*, Trappist ales and a tourist-pleasing mascot-statue of a small boy peeing – the endlessly copied *Manneken-Pis* – also suit a capital for a People's Europe. And make a magnet for European, even Atlantic, communities.

Why did Brussels become capital of the 25-member European Union (EU) and its nearly 462 million people? Simple: central location, easy access, no big-country jealousies, an international language (French), plus a variation of Dutch and a smattering of German. Lifestyle (great food, shopping, walkable streets) and cheerful, well-educated people also seduced statesmen looking for a congenial capital.

The EU's executive branch, the European Commission, needs all the help it can get to convince its member-peoples that "Europe" is more than directives on the proper size of a sugar beet or banana – actual cases of past bureaucratic nonsense. Polls and last year's French and Dutch referendum votes against a European Constitution both reveal wide disaffection from Europe.

Spectacular corruption – nepotism, regional grants going to Mafiosi, parliamentarians fiddling expenses on top of sumptuous salaries – have also done damage. National politicians cynically blame "Brussels" and its "distant" bureaucrats for every domestic problem – much as Canadian provincial politicians blame "Ottawa." Autistic politicians negotiating incomprehensible constitutional documents – Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice – also make Europe look like a plaything of disconnected, self-serving elites.

Putting the EU on auto-pilot to seemingly unlimited expansion (Romania and Bulgaria next, then the Balkans, then Turkey?) only scares people more. A mythical "Polish plumber" helped defeat the May 2005 French referendum vote as trade unions imagined invasion by low-cost eastern workers. The Balkans flag ethnic wars. And Turkey conjures up terrors of Europe's cultural dilution: if ever Muslim Turkey gets into the EU, it will be the largest member-state in all of "Christian" Europe.

Such abstractions stir understandable fears. Restoring momentum toward a stronger Europe demands that the European Commission act on many fronts. Far better communication of its missions and accomplishments. A massive increase in EC "people" programs – the excellent Erasmus student-exchange network already engages 2,199 universities throughout Europe. Linking law-makers and voters: the widely scorned European Parliament should get out and sell Europe to its peoples – possibly in a continuous public dialogue with ordinary citizens.

Finally (think of Ottawa again?), the Commission should make "Brussels" a continent's liveable Mecca. Helping Europeans – starting with journalists and teachers? -- to visit their continent's capital for well-tailored briefing sessions could shine a spotlight

on why today's united Europe was launched: to prevent war, and to make safer, richer lives for real people.

NATO and the rarely-remembered Western European Union, also in or near Brussels, could contribute to rediscovering 20th-century history. They, like the EU, emerged as part of the West's defences of freedom in the Cold War. Europeans may remember ancient kings and battles. But far too few, especially the young, see "Brussels" as a bulwark against the bloodshed and oppression Europe suffered in recent generations.

Belgium, and especially Brussels, can bring home to Europeans much of the good, and some of the dangers, of the past century. The hard-won good is freedom, stability and management of differences. The dangers now come mainly from dealing with new, exotic ethnicities, religions and cultures. Belgians, with all their sometimes pettifogging linguistic quarrels, have centuries of experience taming invaders – call it subtly seducing foreigners.

Already Belgium, like most European nations, is trembling with ethno-cultural and religious tensions as Islam and 'Christianity' collide. The anti-immigrant party *Vlaams Belang* is not alone in highlighting conflict. There are no simple answers, but sensible immigration and refugee policies, plus emphasis on integration, come first. Politically correct multiculturalism has led to ghettos and alienation.

But surely part of reconciling past and future lies in pondering how Belgians – these stubborn, resourceful peoples invaded by Caesar, Napoleon, Franks, Burgundians, Spaniards, Austrians and Germans – have always come out on top. And with sense of irony intact.

Go and ponder all this in the Grand'Place. The architecture alone, even without an assist from Mozart and that foamy Trappist ale, will tell you much about Europe. And why Brussels belongs at its heart.