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Editorial

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Over a period of two years, a think-tank, including a sounding board group of 50 people from all over Liège, has been working on an analysis of the present and possible future of Liège and its economy with the Paris-based Futuribles Group and its president Hugues de Jouvenel.

In the study and at a press conference in Liège, he pointed to the assets of the Province of Liège in the life sciences, aerospace, precision engineering and logistics, but also to its slow decline as result of its over-dependence on heavy industry and the failure of the political and economic establishment to act in the face of change.

He sketches four possible futures and is adventurous in his metaphors to describe them: Stone statues, or China dogs, that can only glare, in essence insensitive to what is going on, turning Liège in a little more than a dormitory province. Another metaphor he uses is one in which the previous position deteriorates and a situation arises in which everyone is at one another's throats.

Then there is the swallow option, where development strategy swoops upward, making a break with the industrial past, so as to avoid too great a dependence on a single sector. In this possible future, R&D progress, SME funding, resource pooling and coordinating and establishing coherence in public development are successful.

A fourth possible future develops on this: Liège rises as the phoenix from its ashes and everybody talks about the miracle.

The assets and potential of Liège and its historical importance are well established. One point that keeps on recurring in the analysis of the situation is, however, the inability of the political establishment to make clear and constructive decisions.

Mr de Jouvenel talks about producing an inventory of the possible synergies and complementary characteristics in the area; of internal and external alliances; of the vital strategic location of Liège and the possibilities of it expanding within a Euroregion - something that was emphasized at the press conference by Mr Mestrez of SPI+.

Hugues de Jouvenel then looks at manufacturing industry, which needs to be diversified so that there is less sensitivity to economic downturns. Technical training and coherent land management are important features; transport and mobility policy and areas such as agriculture, economy and tourism too that should not be neglected.

One thing that is absent is any specific proposal relating to the decision-making procedure and the political structure, surely a key to the problems of Liège. Strangely, M. de Jouvenel's proposals, which seem in many ways to derive from his family's tradition, his father being the late Bertrand de Jouvenel - a leading economist, political scientist and futurologist, deferred to by Alvin Toffler - did not use some of the most relevant of his father's political insights or metaphors.

One missed the Minotaur of political power that has to be confronted. He did however paraphrase his father's observation that 'a society of sheep must in time beget a government of wolves'.

[An interesting footnote on his father was that he (Bertrand de Jouvenel), in addition to being a leading political economist, also managed to be his stepmother Colette's teenage lover; to have married the eminent American journalist Martha Gellhorn, briefly at some point; and also to have had the great French political thinker Raymond Aron rise from his deathbed to defend him against false accusations relating to his political role in WWII; afterwards Aron returned to his bed to die].

<http://www.liege2020.be>