



Irwin Stelzer: It would be worse if we were Europe

By: [Irwin M. Stelzer](#)
Examiner Columnist
February 26, 2010

So you think you've got troubles? A president determined to wrest control of your health care from you? Taxes that are certain to go up? Banks that won't lend? A shaky economy? For what it's worth, you -- we -- are the envy of Europe, a fact I learned during a quick visit.

Europeans are comparing their close-to-zero growth rate in the last quarter of 2009 with our almost-6 percent growth. Never mind about details like the effect of the inventory buildup in the last quarter and other stuff of pedants' comments.

We are growing and they are not. Which contributes to the overwhelming gloom that dominates the conversation of Europeans I have met -- admittedly, not a random sample. Large numbers of shops in London are shuttered, students see no prospect of work when they graduate, and businessmen are groaning under rising tax burdens.

Throw in rainy, gray, cold and gloomy weather that would make a paralyzing snowstorm a cheery break, and you have personal if not economic depression on a large scale.

Then there is transportation. In Washington, we have problems with the Metro, and in New York the subway system is no model of cleanliness and safety. And we sit in airplane seats that require knees-on-chest, and are ministered to by cabin crew made sullen by reduced incomes and benefits, serving something that close examination reveals to be food, at least for the unsqueamish.

Don't complain. Hop the Eurostar from London to Paris, and risk sitting in a dark tunnel for hours, yearning for a safe, comfortable Acela trip from Washington to New York. Or try boarding your scheduled Lufthansa flight, canceled because of a strike.

Or plan to fly British Air, styling itself as the world's favorite airline, and find that you will get to your destination only if the cabin crews do not trigger the strike they have voted overwhelmingly to call when it suits them, and inconveniences you.

Upset with the performance of our government? The House dominated by members far to the left of the generality of voters, the Senate run by a majority leader who has no need to

let his members see the bills on which they will be voting, the White House run by a Chicago mafia with little respect for the lifestyle of most Americans. Cheer up. It could be worse.

Upset with the performance of our government? The House dominated by members far to the left of the generality of voters, the Senate run by a majority leader who has no need to let his members see the bills on which they will be voting, the White House run by a Chicago mafia with little respect for the lifestyle of most Americans. Cheer up. It could be worse.

In Britain, several members of Parliament have been found cheating on their expenses, some even getting reimbursed for mortgage payments on second homes that don't exist, others claiming the maintenance of the moats and duck ponds on their country estates as legitimate expenses. The country is going broke, taxes are at levels that frighten foreign investors, and neither party seems to have an answer to Britain's woes.

In Italy, Venice is under water, and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who in any other country would be rattled by scandals and a divorce action by an angry wife, has just nominated his dental hygienist/model for a seat in parliament.

In Greece, the government has been caught selling off future income streams such as airport landing fees for current cash, and then concealing the liabilities in a series of off-balance sheet maneuvers.

Spain has a 20 percent unemployment rate (40 percent for under-24-year-olds), Portugal is close to broke, growth in Germany has stalled, and the European Union is reeling from President's Obama refusal to attend its spring summit meeting, a turndown that makes them wish for good old George W. Bush, who good-naturedly suffered through these content-free photo ops so beloved of European politicians.

I know. Europe's woes should not make our problems any more bearable. Were we saints, they would not. But we aren't.