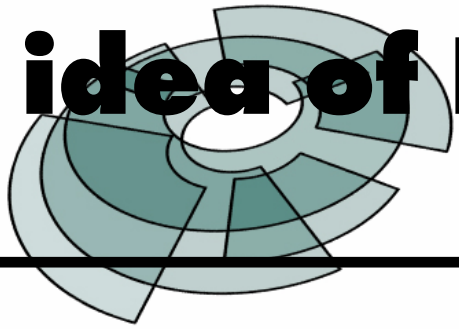
FEDERAL UNION

The idea of Europe



By Will Hutton **Article Number 16**

Today's European Union is a remarkable, if still incomplete, achievement. Its founding six members have been augmented by another nine and up to ten additional countries in eastern Europe, as well as Malta and Cyprus, are now on course to join. The formerly communist countries want to guarantee their commitment to democracy and the market economy through EU membership in the same way that Spain, Portugal and Greece did twenty years ago. Europe at last has reached agreement on its core principles, and has constructed the institutional and security apparatus peacefully to protect them. If it seems that contemporary Europe could never again repeat the mistakes of the past, it is the fact that the postwar generation and its visionary leaders – men like France's Jean Monnet and Robert: Schuman, Belgium's Paul-Henri Spaak, Italy's Alcide de Gasperi and Germany's Konrad Adenauer – had the courage and foresight to lay the cornerstones of what has become the contemporary European Union that makes it probable if not certain that Europe will never again go to war with itself. It is an achievement that, given Europe's tormented past – and the ethnic conflicts that overwhelmed the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s – is worth consolidating and protecting to the last.

The open question is what this European Union really is and what it could become. Its Eurosceptic critics and some of its supporters see it already as close to a surrogate federal state, and determinedly moving further in that direction. Jean Monnet, the moving force behind the first attempt in European integration that resulted in the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952, three years later became the president of the Committee for the United States of Europe – hardly disguising his ambitions for what Europe might be. But what the EU has become since then suggests that its ultimate destination will be very different from a federal state; indeed, it has had elements of both a club of sovereign member states and a new supranational entity since its beginning, and the two sit in permanent tension. It is nearer a United Europe of States – a muddier, complex and less clear-cut political conception than a new federal European state; but workable, legitimate and potentially extraordinarily powerful as a champion of European values and interests.

The EU needs to be less sceptical and seize the moment, not least in its own interest. Currently, each national political class avoids openly acknowledging its own powerlessness and making an overtly European case to its own electorate, fearful that an opposition party might win political advantage by criticising it for not protecting the national interest. Political parties everywhere are keenly aware of the electorate's disillusion with parties and the weakening of party loyalties; they do not want to fan the flames by conceding that the disillusion is even partly justified. Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's desire to assert Italian interests and French uncertainty about their relationship to the EU as it stands poised for enlargement, heralding a further weakening of French influence, are as much part of this trend as British Euroscepticism.

The lack of realism and honesty is self-defeating. Europe's member states need to begin to argue for a European interest in which they locate their own interest, rather than to regard European initiatives as something to be avoided because they are politically difficult to sell. By arguing for empowerment through Europe they can win back the legitimacy that comes with political action actually changing things. If any particular member state is suffering from a shortfall in demand, say, then its governing party needs to argue that its own national response win be more effective if it is part of a Europe-wide response. This is the real route to furthering individual national interests – and empowering governments.

And this approach would have redoubled force if Europeans were less defensive about the advantages of the European economic and social model, and more aggressive about using the single economic space that they have created to advance this model, albeit while respecting national variations. This proposition needs to be supported by saying as forcefully as possible that every member of the European Union – France, Germany, Britain, or any other European state – has values and aims

that they hold in common and which they can no longer articulate as effective policies within the context of their national communities alone. That with globalisation – especially given its powerful American character – matters are not going to get any better. That together they are stronger. And that the euro offers them a sovereignty and chance of democracy in monetary and economic affairs that they are steadily losing if they do nothing.

If mainland Europeans started to argue in this way, they would quickly raise an echo not only in their own countries, but in Britain. The old way of framing the pro-European argument – we must stop doing things even if we are profoundly attached to them because this will serve the great cause of European integration – needs to give way to the argument that we must do things together because that way we will get better results. It is this argument that ultimately will win any referendum on the euro in Britain. It has to become, across Europe, a truth that hardly needs to be stated.

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The constituent parts of Europe have core values in common. If it wants to protect its associative, stakeholder capitalisms and their accompanying social contracts before the march of globalisation it needs to be able to find a continental political voice to do just that; and it is already some way towards that goal. It is perfectly possible to design a more politically accountable system of European governance in the here and now, building on what we have, but respecting the principle that as far as possible government authority should be close to the people in the member states. It is also possible to develop a constructive agenda of building up Europe rather than tearing down barriers to trade.

And while it is obvious that Europe at present does not have a European public to hold it to account, that does not mean that such a public will never be attainable; it may take more generations, but European peoples themselves harbour ambitions for themselves and their continent that suggest that, far from Europe being the top-down enterprise that Eurosceptics depict, what is happening reflects deeply felt urges and sentiments. One poll, for example, shows that approaching three-quarters of Europeans would like at some time in their life to live and work elsewhere in Europe – compared to the 0.4 per cent who succeed in doing so.

Moreover, the revelation of the extent of US military power in recent wars, and the cavalier disregard by the Bush administration of its treaty commitments and European views, has prompted a growing awareness within Europe of its common values, attitudes and interests. A United States of Europe is eminently buildable, not least as a countervailing power to the United States of America. Indeed, the peoples of Europe need it sooner with the passing of every month.

Will Hutton is chief executive of the Work Foundation and columnist for the Observer, where he was editor and then editor-in-chief for four years. This article is based on his book "The world we're in" (Little, Brown, 2002). The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of Federal Union. January 2004

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