

# What is world federalism?



By Keith Best

Article Number 4

Despite the world's richest (USA) and the most populous (India) democracies living under a federal system, as well as it being well understood in Europe (with the German experience) "federal" has become the "f" word in Britain and has been adopted as a term of abuse by those wishing to lambast the European Union as having too much power over the member states. It has become a watchword for "superstate" and governmental tyranny.

***"A federal state is one that keeps political power at the lowest level necessary and reserves it upwards only when decisions require it."***

The founding fathers of America (who first experimented with a confederal structure before settling on the present federal one) would not understand this. For them and for others a federal state is one that keeps political power at the lowest level necessary and reserves it upwards only when decisions require it – it is a bottom up system of government not a top down one.

Ask an American President: the most powerful person on the world stage but, domestically, has power more fettered than a British Prime Minister who, as yet, does not have to confront states' rights within the UK or a hostile supreme constitutional court. If this misunderstanding is the fate that awaits European federalism then what chance does world federalism have?

Modern world federalism does not advocate a global superstate with the associated tyranny that this could bring. It does not envisage a President of the World. It does, however, want to see a strengthening of global institutions but subject to democratic accountability.

***"Modern world federalism does not advocate a global superstate with the associated tyranny that this could bring."***

That is why world federalists have concentrated on a UN Parliamentary Assembly as the democratic input for "we the peoples ..." alongside the General Assembly (for the states) and led the NGO community in promoting the International Criminal Court. Although there is nexus, world federalism is more than global governance.

The Commission on Global Governance, chaired by Sir Shridath Ramphal, former Commonwealth Secretary General, was at pains to point out that global governance is not the same as global government.

"By global governance, we mean the way in which we manage global affairs, how we relate to each other, how we take decisions that bear on our common future. There should be no misunderstanding about the term – by global governance we do not mean global government as that would only reinforce the roles of states and governments; global governance is about putting people

at the centre of world affairs." (*Our Global Neighbourhood - the basic vision*, Geneva 1995).

We should remember, however, why Sir Winston Churchill, Eisenhower, Einstein, Nehru and others all espoused the concept of world government. It was the aftermath of a terrible conflagration in which aggrandisement of the nation state, whether territorially or in trade or influence, had been the excuse over the centuries for aggression against neighbours. The nation state needed to be tamed. That could be done only through a higher authority.

***"We should remember why Sir Winston Churchill and others espoused the concept of world government."***

It is small wonder that we are now seeing more and more states, usually within their own geographical regions but not exclusively so, coming together in binding agreements, pooling their national sovereignty in favour of a greater good – whether for the maintenance of peace or prosperity or both.

Essentially, there is a need for the international rule of law to govern both the relationship between states and the activities of heads of state and multi-nationals which transcend national boundaries. It is a platitude but also an axiom to state that we live in a global village in which migration of peoples, religions and ideas is increasing. As our President Sir Peter Ustinov sums it up - world



## What is world federalism?

federalism is the only way in which we can enjoy the differences between ourselves.

The essence was explained in a pamphlet *World Federalism Today* by the World Association for World Federation (as the World Federalist Movement was then known) published in 1988:

"Federalism has proven the most effective way to organise governance when there are numerous states which want autonomy in some matters, yet must work together in others. That is why federalism is so relevant to the situation which exists in the world today. In a world federation, nation-states would look after their internal affairs as they do now, whereas in their relations with other states they would agree to govern themselves through a new United Nations empowered to make and uphold law. A federal United Nations would be democratically structured to be representative of every person. World federalism is a way for different nations and cultures to

preserve their identities and protect their interests and their legitimate sovereign rights, while still being able to act together on matters of common concern, such as the prevention of war, the eradication of poverty and the preservation of the environment. World federalism leads toward a gentler, more democratic world."

***"World federalism is the only way in which we can enjoy the differences between ourselves."***

That was written before the fall of the Berlin Wall. When, as now, there remains effectively only one superpower in the world it is even more important that there should be mechanisms for ensuring that this one country does not exert tyranny, however benevolently intended, on the rest of the world. The attitude towards Kyoto is a current example. Why do we not have a world environment agency?

World federalism, as a concept, is not static but evolving as the world changes. Such a philosophy has

underlying principles but is essentially dynamic and pragmatic - looking at opportunities for advancing the principles whenever they present themselves. The end of the Cold War and the final agreement on an International Criminal Court are the latest milestones. Those involved with the movement for many years have seen that what was still regarded as an impossible and idealistic vision only twenty years ago is now being discussed at the highest levels of international diplomacy and is beginning to be translated into reality. It will come as no surprise that our next goal is the elimination of war as an illegal act and the substitution of binding arbitration as a means of settling international disputes. Why not?

*Keith Best was formerly a Conservative MP and is now Chairman of the Executive Committee of the World Federalist Movement. He can be contacted at keithbest@hotmail.com. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of Federal Union. First edition, June 2001.*

---

## Join Federal Union

Federal Union was founded in 1938 to campaign for federalism for the UK, Europe and the world. It has argued since then that democracy and the rule of law are ideas that extend beyond the nation state. It is the UK section of the Union of European Federalists.

Name (Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms) .....

Address .....

.....

.....

Postcode.....

Telephone.....

E-mail.....

Signature.....

Date.....

I enclose a cheque payable to "Federal Union" for:

- ☐ £10 (waged)
- ☐ £5 (unwaged)
- ☐ £5 (student)
- ☐ donation of £\_\_\_\_\_

Please complete and return to:  
Federal Union, PO Box 44404, London SE1 7TZ

email: [info@federalunion.org.uk](mailto:info@federalunion.org.uk)

web: [www.federalunion.org.uk](http://www.federalunion.org.uk)

Federal Union may occasionally make your details available to other sympathetic organisations. Tick here if you do not want your details passed on. ☐4