

## **[Comment] Supranationalism is not a gaffe**

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The fuss last week over whether Commission Vice-President Margot Wallström actually made those reported remarks about intergovernmentalism leading to war does not matter: the content of those remarks does.

We should not mistake the way the European Union has changed the way in which the different countries in Europe relate to each other. And that is because of the way in which the EU itself works.

No-one should suppose that while the EU has brought peace, we now have peace and that the EU is therefore no longer necessary. Peace is not an achievement; it is a continual act of reaffirmation.

To let the EU falter or even fall apart under the impulse of nationalist and even racist politics evokes some very bad memories. No-one should be complacent. Europe has been here before.

After the first world war, the ambition of the peacemakers was not merely to end the war but to end all war. The League of Nations was intended to provide a means of settling international disputes by peaceful means rather than violent ones. European countries queued up to join.

And the entry into the League of defeated Germany in 1925 seemed to put an end to the fears of war and confirmed that this idea was working. The Kellogg-Briand pact of 1928 went even further: its signatories renounced forever the right to use force as an instrument of policy.

But it all fell apart. These agreements between governments could not last when governments looked to break them for short-term advantage. The fact is that intergovernmentalism is not enough.

Intergovernmental decision-making does exactly what it says on the tin: governments come together to take decisions. If you are in government, that may be fine, but most people are not in government and it is not obvious why intergovernmentalism should suit them.

Supranational decision-making may look rather similar to its intergovernmental equivalent – indeed, within the EU treaties, the transition from the latter to the former has sometimes been hard to discern – but there is a world of difference between them.

The crucial difference that supranationalism makes is that it gives citizens a stake in collective decision-making. There are institutions to represent the common interest – such as the European Commission – and institutions to represent the voters directly – such as the European Parliament.

The creation of these new institutions changes everything. National governments can be held to their decisions and forced to keep their word. Something other than the desire for mere short-term advantage comes into play. In an era of government by headline, that is possibly more valuable than we can ever know.

Compare the last fifty years in Europe with the previous fifty to see the difference that supranationalism makes. That is why I would have been happy if Margot Wallström had given voice to this thought.

But if it pleases the critics, let's change the tense. Rather than saying this is where intergovernmentalism leads, it is beyond dispute to say that Terezin is where intergovernmentalism led.

*Richard Laming is Director of Federal Union. He writes here in a personal capacity.*

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