

Only a federal European Union can respond effectively to the existential challenges that confront the world



By John Pinder

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When Federal Union was launched in London in 1938 it had extraordinary success, with membership rising rapidly to ten thousand and support from leading politicians, academics and newspapers. The background to this was, for many British people, the perception of an existential challenge to the nation-state from the ruinous impact of the international economy in the 1930s and the rise of aggressive fascism leading to war. But the second world war was won and the British emerged confident that their nation-state had served its purpose and future challenges could, like that of the war, be overcome under American leadership. So Britain dragged its feet at the start of European unification and has, with some exceptions, done so ever since.

On the European Continent, to the contrary, federalist movements before the war were generally weak, whereas the war brought home the existential challenge to the nation-state and its citizens in the clearest possible way; and this led to the growth of strong federalist movements together with widespread acceptance of the idea of a federal Europe to ensure peace and security for the future. So the European Community was established by six core states, with pre-federal powers and institutions to provide a framework for that purpose; and it has been deepened to deal with other problems of interdependence, notably in the economy and the environment, as well as widened to include most European countries. The

United Kingdom came to participate as a reluctant and anti-federalist member state, with governments which never understood that the stepwise but radical reform of powers and institutions to create a working federal system was required in order to deal with the challenges of increasing interdependence in Europe and the world.

The global existential challenges

New existential challenges have, however, become more and more evident, in the fields of security, climate change and economic globalisation. British people feel as strongly as other Europeans the need to improve the world system in order to overcome them. But they lack a clear idea of what to do about it. They sense that American hegemony is not the answer but have scant conception of what, beyond protesting, can in fact be done. There are however two ways to avoid absolute hegemony of the United States, which in the not-so-long run would be as disastrous for the Americans as for the rest of us.

One is to wait a decade or two in the expectation that China will become an equivalent superpower which, even if it happens, would be a dangerous delay in an explosive world and a dangerous combination in view of the profound differences of political culture and international experience between Americans and Chinese.

The other is to convert the European Union into a power at least equivalent to the US in all respects save military capacity, while substantially developing the Union's military strength as well.

Altiero Spinelli, in his speech to the founding congress of the UEF at Montreux in August 1947, observed that Marshall Aid was a remarkable manifestation of liberal America which gave Europeans the chance to unite. But he predicted that, if a European federation was not established which could become an equal partner, the United States would become an imperial America. Slowly but surely his prediction has been fulfilled.

In its internal affairs, the EU has moved far towards becoming a federal polity, and the Constitution drafted by the Convention should take it some steps farther. But in foreign policy and defence it remains overwhelmingly intergovernmental, thus ineffective and undemocratic. The British and a number of other governments insist on keeping the veto over decisions on a common EU policy; and they resist any adequate role for the Commission and the Parliament, together with the creation of essential common instruments for policy in these fields. So long as this is the case, the Union will be unable to bring balance into the global system and the attempts of member states to exert substantial influence on American policy will remain fruitless, as will American efforts to bring order into the affairs of the



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world. It is naive to suppose that Europeans can have such influence without the power that can be exercised only by effective and democratic common institutions endowed with the necessary competences backed by policy instruments: in fact by a federal European Union.

Only a federal EU can convert American hegemony into partnership and lead a multipolar world in building effective multilateral institutions

The Union does already possess quasi-federal powers and institutions in the fields of trade and aid; and here it is at least an equal partner with the United States. It has also used its environmental powers to lead the world, despite intransigent American opposition, in the first steps towards controlling greenhouse gas emissions enough to avert potentially catastrophic climate change. With the euro it has an instrument that should give it similar weight in the international financial system. But not only is it weakened by the opting out of Denmark, Sweden and the UK; the member states have also failed to give the Union the powers it needs to

conduct an effective external monetary policy.

These examples illustrate the Union's potential to become not just equal to the United States but a more powerful actor in fields other than military might, i.e. in most of the fields that determine whether the world will become a safer and more prosperous place: in short, the EU can be the principal partner in matters of 'soft security' just as the United States is in 'hard security'; and the EU can use its strength to influence a multipolar world to accept the need for increasingly effective multilateral and global institutions.

But there is a vast gap between the potential and the performance, due to the inadequacy of the Union's powers and institutions which would be remedied by reforms going beyond those in the draft Constitution to a properly federal Union. Underlying the Union's failure to undertake these reforms and use its powers to good effect is a failure of vision as to what a European federation could achieve.

For the influence of a fully federal European Union offers the world's

best hope for dealing with the existential challenge to a civilised life, and perhaps even to life itself, on this planet. If this is understood, the British will surely join other Europeans who are determined that, having exported to the rest of the world Europe's nation-state system and the wars it generated here, we shall now complete the process of converting the Union into a truly democratic and effective federation, and thus together play the key part in meeting the challenges that confront the world, including the eradication of mass poverty, the stabilisation of the climate and the establishment of permanent peace.

This article was written by John Pinder, Chairman of the Federal Trust. John Pinder is the author of numerous books, including "The Building of the European Union" and, most recently, "The European Union: a Very Short Introduction". The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of Federal Union. November 2003.

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Federal Union was founded in 1938 and campaigns for federalism for the UK, Europe and the world. It argues that democracy and the rule of law should apply to states as well as within them. It is the UK section of the Union of European Federalists.

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