

The Democracy Deficit and European Governance: Towards A Sustainable Politics

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“Decades of half-steps towards integration have made a strange chimera of Europe: part superstate, part United Nations; a French-inspired system that now mostly speaks English; a single market that still lacks a single system of patents; a common currency without a joint economic or fiscal policy....The unity of Europe has always been like the heavenly Jerusalem, an ideal never to be reached. But increasingly Europe’s business is conducted in an earthly Jerusalem...Ever closer union has become even harder....These days the task is merely to preserve what has been achieved....”

The Economist, September 4, 2010

Getting back to Old Business.

The events of the past year have made it clear that keeping Europe together today is a bigger challenge than many of us might have dreamt just a couple of years ago. The financial crisis in its various manifestations has eroded confidence in the public sphere accelerating the centrifugal forces bearing down upon European unity. Thus the financial crisis seems to have fuelled the fires of extremism both on the right and on the left. The lack of confidence in the ability of political leaders in the national states to cope with the situation is paralleled by intensification of social conflicts, which have seen the growth of nationalism and xenophobia on the one hand, and the demand for protection on the other. The unexpected depth of the finance crisis has removed the word ‘regulation’ from the *index verborum prohibitorum* on the view of even the staunchest free marketers. The center is under attack at precisely the time that we need the stability that only a firm center can provide.

However, we easily overlook the fact that the center of European politics was less robust before the crisis than it might seem to us today: for more than 30 years people have lamented the existence of a ‘democracy deficit’ in the European Union. While various meanings have been attached to this phrase perhaps the most persistence source of complaint has been that European institutions are so complicated as to lack transparency, which leads to a concomitant lack of

accountability with respect to decision taken by the organs of the European Union. Thus to many Europeans the European Union gives the impression of being run by a caste of mandarins far removed from ordinary citizens in the individual nation states. For these citizens the finance crisis is embedded in a failure of democratic practice in the public arena and therefore lamentably unsurprising.

It has been easy to overlook all this because the media event that the 'finance crisis' has produced (which has a life of its own as it were independently of financial institutions and policies) seems to have deflected our attention from the 'democracy deficit' in the EU which is clearly older and no less clearly unresolved. The latter has been driven from the headlines by the former in such a way that it seems to disappear from the popular collective memory – something that should remind us of a pressing need for a truly European media to help keep public opinion clearly focussed upon basic matters of European politics rather than sensationalism. The Irish 'no' to Lisbon was a symbolic gesture on the part of well-informed beneficiaries of European policies, who had no doubts about the desirability of sustaining and even strengthening the Union, rooted in a conjunction of financial anxieties in the form of bursting bubbles and scepticism with respect to pro-European Union Irish political leadership. The yet bigger financial crisis triggered by the collapse of Lehman Bros. a few months later has tended to make us forget, as we should not, that because the worst of the finance crisis was yet to come at the time the Irish voted in June 2008.

We forget at our peril that there has existed a set of longstanding unresolved problems about failure on the part of European citizens to identify with the European Union because they do not feel that they participate in European politics. The fact that there was highly restricted popular interest in the European parliamentary elections in 2009 with a mere 43% participation, the lowest ever, can hardly fail to be interpreted as a sign of lethargy, apathy and alienation on the part of European citizens. This is 'old news'. What is newer but certainly no less distressing is the centripetal tendencies that individual national states exhibit with regard to the most important common goals within the Union notably the completion of the single market.

Beyond doubt, the finance crisis can only be met with the sort of strong political will to economic reform and discipline surrounding 'exit strategies' foreseen in the Lisbon Treaty and Strategy 2020 but that should not blind us to the importance

of mobilizing citizens as well as national parliaments to meet the challenges that Europe presents us with in 2010. It has rightly been stressed that it is the European parliament's task as a driving force in implementing Strategy 2020. The problem is that the permanent dialogue foreseen by that strategy seems to ignore the 'democracy deficit' inasmuch as it simply assumes that the conditions for such dialogue exist. It is no small part of the unfinished project that Europe is – something much better understood in the former Communist countries than in the founding states – that economic policies alone do not create an effective political will in the best of cases.

The State of the Union and the Idea of a European Forum

"Europe is an experiment, and frequently frustrating," says, one senior official. In its defence it is, he argues, "the best functioning organization in the world that attempts to deal with the fact that politics is local, and economics is global" (*The Economist*, 10.10.2009, 28).

What we should learn from the disappointments, frustration and anger with the European Union is that European democratic practice must be anchored locally. The European Forum that we have proposed should speak directly to the issue by linking the concerns of local communities in which sympathy is a central value to both national and international institutions, whose capability for creating frameworks for large-scale programs that can meet local concerns can be exploited. Naturally, that is no simple task either from the organizational or the political point of view. In one way or another it is the task of the European parliament. What is needed is a European Forum linked to parliament where ordinary people can have input into policies relating to the larger European issues typically associated with globalization such as economics, ecology, energy, security, health etc. The local branches of the forum should create a kind of political workshop where open discussion across perspectives, which are sure to be frequently heated and frustrating, can take place that will have an impact upon both national and European issues. There is very broad agreement among a wide variety of thinkers (Lippmann, MacIntyre, Crick, Sen) that renewed public discourse is absolutely central to realizing justice (what is often taken

to be lacking in the European Union by its critics) politically in our world. The demand to create a European Forum for political debate is consonant with that insight.

Europarlimentarians should organize and participate in these discussions adding a touch of “realism” from their parliamentary experience, explaining what is practically feasible with respect to a given problem at a given point in time. They should convey the critical spirit of popular sentiment that emerges to the European Parliament. This is all part of the complex task of representation. The danger that threatens Europe is pseudo-democratic populist demagoguery, i.e., mobilizing broad segments of the populace against big government in Brussels by cultivating popular sentiments. Populism turns elected officials away from genuine representation to a mere tribune function. Briefly, it is political disaster in a republican state. As Bernard Crick has put the matter, “representatives must be politicians: if they all simply represent their immediate constituents and did not mediate, compromise, and occasionally think of the interests of government, they might survive but it is unlikely that the republic would.” It should be clear from the start that we should not expect anything like substantive consensus to emerge immediately from those laborious exploratory discussions either at a local or at some higher level. Even if there is not consensus about policies, there must be consent about procedures. This is one way in which that can be accomplished, which is in complete accord with the demands of subsidiary as understood in the Lisbon treaty.

No small part of our problem bears centrally upon the current situation of national parties within Europe. No small part of the current European crisis of democratic practice is to be found in a series of radical transformations of political life that have changed the meaning of representation in politics. The changing role of traditional political ideologies, the emergence of unelected finance and regulatory agencies and increasing recourse to direct democracy in the form of binding referenda have circumscribed traditional politics and deeply affected our political parties. In the worst of cases perceptible tendencies to self-encapsulation, self-gratification, and self-sufficiency within national parties have emerged to alienate their traditional constituents with Europe paying the price. Extremism both on the right and on the left is the result. Thus many Europeans think that if there is no more reason to vote for my traditional centrist national party, how can I possibly take European politics, which is based upon national politics, seriously? Politics at the

national level seems increasingly remote from the lives of individual citizens and increasingly incapable of responding to their needs and super-national politics a-fortiori even less so. Voters are fed up with politics as usual and have protested against it by supporting radical movements on the right and the left.

Yet, this very alienation is in fact a signal that a reform of politics in the sense of re-invigorating the center is overdue. National leaders ignore that challenge at their peril. Moreover, the Lisbon Treaty stipulates that responsibility for respecting the principle of subsidiarity lies clearly at the national level, the initiative lies more clearly than ever with national political leaders. So it would be logical for national political leaders to concern themselves more than even with invigorating their constituents' concern for European matters – something that is certainly required if we are to cope politically with the great strains that these tumultuous times place upon citizens, states and Europe itself. Clearly, a media initiative on a large scale, indeed, a media reform, has to be an essential element in involving Europeans in Europe. There is, indeed, a big task at hand if we are to create a politics capable of sustaining Europe economically, socially and culturally.