

## **[salt&pepper] Tony Blair: nul points**

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EUOBSERVER / SALT&PEPPER - Following the British failure to score any points in the Eurovision song contest at the weekend, I am waiting for the British government to insist that the contest has to "reform". Plainly it has to modernise and become more flexible. European singing is not yet run properly: that is the explanation of British failure.

The alternative possibility - that it is the British themselves that are at fault somehow - is surely implausible. After all, in the dream world of Westminster, Britain is leading in Europe. And to the extent that Britain is not in fact shaping Europe, the pretence otherwise must be maintained.

The inclusion or otherwise of the word "federal" in the European constitution is a case in point.

After all, it is a factually accurate description of how the European Union works. In certain areas of policy, defined by the constitution, European law is superior to national law and has a direct effect on the citizen. That's what a "federal basis" is, no more, no less. It is how the European Union has worked since it was founded fifty years ago. I look out of the window and see that the sky has not yet fallen in.

But for British politicians, removing this word is important. Why?

European federalism has been characterised as the end of civilisation. Our island way of life will come to an end. Ancient British traditions, like waiting hours for a broken-down train or months for a hip operation, are under threat. Someone told me last week that the European constitution was the biggest threat to liberty since 1066.

All nonsense of course, but all symbolised by the F word. So out it comes.

It is an attitude that makes me a little bit sad and a little bit angry. I use an F word of my own.

I am saddened because federalism has a perfectly valid heritage - a British heritage, moreover - but the role of the British founders of federalism in Europe seems to be airbrushed out of history. I am angry because it is an attitude that serves neither Britain nor Europe well.

Tony Blair said that "Once in each generation, the case for Britain in Europe needs to be remade, from first principles." It doesn't have to be like this: the French and the Italians aren't forced to do it once in a generation. The only reason Britain is going through this debate now is that it didn't do it properly last time. Telling the British public that they should be glad that federalism has been defeated in Europe is only storing up trouble for the future.

Much better to say that, yes, Europe is organised on a federal basis, and that is precisely why it works. Once the British get used to this, Europe as a whole will be stronger.

Tony Blair once seemed to offer a new approach to Europe, but over the last few years it has become clear that he is just more of the same. He has reverted to the traditional British stiff upper lip, as described by General Melchett: "If nothing else works, a total pig-headed unwillingness to look facts in the face will see us through."

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