

[salt&pepper] Europe should trust its voters

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EUOBSERVER / SALT&PEPPER - I was asked recently about a proposal that the European constitution should include a provision harmonising criminal penalties for domestic violence. What could be more fundamental to our European values than the right of women not to be assaulted by their partners?

It was with quite a lot of reluctance that I decided I was against. For there is another European value that also needs to be defended, that of decentralisation. If a member state can deal with something, it should be allowed to. I am a Brussels-sceptic.

In the Convention, one of the things that everyone agrees on is that there are too many decisions taken in Brussels on issues that should really be left to the member states. Subsidiarity has not been respected, they say, and it should be. Various ideas and proposals have been made to stop this happening in the future.

Whenever I come across something about the European Union with which everyone seems to agree, I always get suspicious. I have remarked before on the tendency of people in the Brussels system to pretend to agree in the interests of a quiet life.

So I had to investigate. Which are the laws that have been made in Brussels that are undoubtedly too centralised? I wondered if anybody could name them.

David Heathcoat-Amory, a UK parliamentary representative on the Convention, could mention only two: the directives on zoos and drinking water.

So the fundamental problem with the European Union is that it has harmonised the feeding times for penguins, is it? I think there is more to it than this.

I once remarked to Richard Corbett, a British Labour MEP, that there were too many social regulations coming out of Brussels. No, there aren't, he said, the social dimension is an essential complement to the single market.

What we think is a debate about subsidiarity is actually a debate about something else. It's not Europe versus the member states, but left versus right. This is the stuff of normal party politics.

Erecting this myth of subsidiarity distracts attention from the real problem, which is that decision-making is not accountable enough. This is true not only of the over-centralised decisions but also of the decisions that should be taken in Brussels because member states cannot act effectively on their own.

The section of the draft European constitution on the role of national parliaments falls into exactly this trap. National MPs are invited to crawl all over proposals from the Commission in their formative stages but then avert their eyes while national ministers rewrite them to suit their domestic civil service priorities.

Similarly, the introduction of a rotation system for members of the European Commission might suit their national governments but will do nothing for the effectiveness and accountability of decision-making. If the European Council retains the right to nominate the Commission president, horse-trading will continue to dominate over democracy.

Much better to invite the European Parliament to make the first choice based on the outcome

of the European elections - each party group can put up a candidate - and the member states can make the final ratification. That way, the way that votes cast in the European elections will matter in a way they do not at present.

At the time of the last European elections, Romano Prodi had already been nominated as Commission president six weeks before the elections took place. What kind of an election is it where the results are announced beforehand? No wonder not many people voted.

The problem in Brussels is not so much what it does as how it does it. There are clear political choices waiting to be taken: The voters should be invited to take them.

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