

Let us reorder this world around us: the European constitution and the wider world



By Richard Laming

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"This is a moment to seize. The kaleidoscope has been shaken, the pieces are in flux, soon they will settle again. Before they do let us reorder this world around us."

Tony Blair, 2 October 2001

Having written a pamphlet about European foreign policy and world order, I should start by explaining why I am interested in the subject. It goes back to the days of the campaign for Britain to join the euro. We would put forward the economic benefits of joining the euro and then describe the political arguments, that democracy was not purely a feature of national government and could be exercised at European level if the institutions were designed properly.

"Ah," said our opponents, "then by your logic, you must be in favour of a world government." Well, yes, by my logic I suppose I am.

So, what does someone who is a passionate pro-European say about global issues? We have to be able to say something. Issues such as the Iraqi war are taking centre-stage and it is not possible for pro-Europeans to be silent on the subject. Our view on how the world works needs to be expressed.

Fortunately, we have quite a coherent and organised view of how the world works. The very structure of the EU is based on it. We have, in the EU, replaced relations based on force with relations based on law. Arguments are taking over from armaments. Democracy is slowly replacing diplomacy.

There is an interesting contrast between this world view and that of the current United States government. Robert Kagan famously characterised this by saying that Americans are from Mars, Europeans are from Venus. They want a world based on force, because they are strong. We want a world based on rules, because we are weak. In each case, the choice of force or rules is a rational one based on the current circumstances of each power.

He is trying to explain why Americans and Europeans, with their similar domestic political values of liberal democracy, human rights and the rule of law, have arrived at different attitudes towards international and multilateral institutions. In each case, it is a rational viewpoint based on the different assets of each group: the Americans have strength and so want to use it, while the Europeans lack strength and so want to prevent it being used.

This characterisation seems quite persuasive, but I think that it gets the European viewpoint the wrong way round. Kagan suggests that the Europeans want rules because they are weak. I think that Europeans are weak because they want rules. European weakness is a conscious choice, not the result of circumstances. And it is a conscious choice precisely because of the European experience of where strength has led in the past.

The second world war was a mood-altering moment for Europe, although hardly any of the fashionable

American theorists of international relations - not Philip Bobbitt, author of "The shield of Achilles", for example - seem to understand this. They accept that it was such an occasion for Germany - and they tend to agree that the experience of Vietnam had such an effect on America - but they are unable to imagine that it was such a moment for Europe as a whole. But the experience of the development of European integration clearly shows that international politics is carried out in a new way in Europe.

The history and nature of the European union are unparalleled. A series of treaties has built a set of institutions that looks more and more like a system of government. The powers of the European system have grown, the quality of the democratic input on which it is based have also grown.

And now that the draft constitution is about to become a real proposal, it is time to look at what it might mean for European foreign policy.

On the face of it, there is not much change - some critics have complained for precisely this reason. But there is the potential for much more, if the opportunity can be seized. And this is often how constitutions change, certainly in the history of the EU: they are rewritten to reflect things that have already started to happen.

So, here are four suggestions for things that would make for better foreign policy without, at this stage, amending the constitution again. Next time it is amended, these things can be written in.



Let us reorder this world around us

The European Commission should take the lead in developing European foreign policy. The double-hatted foreign minister, who will be both a servant of the Council and a member of the Commission, should treat his/her Commission role as the more important.

The Council of Ministers should vote by majority as much as possible. Unanimity requires member states to find ways to oppose the decisions that are taken: majority voting obliges them to find ways to support them.

The European Parliament should seek to exercise the maximum possible influence over the foreign policy of the EU. A more powerful Commission requires more parliamentary accountability; a stronger foreign policy needs greater public involvement.

The provisions for structured cooperation, whereby a small group of member states may develop common policies using the Union institutions, should be used to develop defence cooperation. We should not expect that every member state will take part right from the beginning.

Lastly, it is worth saying something about the objectives of Europe's foreign policy. It would be a mistake to create a tool without a clear idea of what that tool is for. But the history of the EU and the way it has grown and developed gives a good idea of what those foreign policy objectives should be.

The EU has shown how to build peace between nations and give them the means to achieve common goals together. The development of federal institutions of government gives citizens a voice and government the power to act. There are lessons from this for the rest of the world.

For example, there is the case of the World Trade Organisation. Its negotiating agenda includes financial and trade issues but it also includes cultural and moral issues. And this second type of issue is even more visible in the GATS negotiations, where cultural products such as films and television programmes are at stake. Are electorates really to be told that changes in these rules are to be made as a result of behind-closed-doors negotiations, or even worse as a result of WTO court decisions?

The issues at stake are too important for so little legitimacy. The WTO should follow the model of the EU and establish a parliamentary assembly. It might only have consultative role for now, but it will create a place where the different ideas and perspectives from around the world can be tested against each other. These debates are not new – the ministers debate them all the time in their closed-door negotiations – but they will become public. That way, the common interest can better be identified and the future of the global economy better secured.

This article is based on a pamphlet published by the One World Trust, which can be found at www.oneworldtrust.org or a copy can be ordered by post from the One World Trust, Houses of Parliament, London SW1A 0AA, price £3 (inc p&p), or using the form below.

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