

LARRY SIEDENTOP

Europe's Great Non-Debate

No one is really grappling with federalism—and that creates an opening for the French

EUROPE IS SLEEPWALKING INTO A CRISIS OF DEMOCRATIC legitimacy. Over the years the transfer of power to Brussels from the nation-states that make up the European Union has not been accompanied by anything like an adequate public debate about Europe's political future. Certainly there has been nothing that can begin to compare with the profound, wide-ranging debate that accompanied the drafting and adoption of the United States Constitution. Europe today lacks its "Federalist Papers."

In many ways, that suits the main shapers of EU institutions—the French political class. Highly educated and full of a confidence created by its success in transforming postwar France, the French political class has worked for what it calls the "harmonizing" of European policies in one area after another. Its latest agenda is to create common policies in taxation, foreign affairs and defense. These are needed, the French insist, in order to give Europe a political weight that corresponds to its economic weight. The creation of a single currency, the euro, has made the creation of what the French call "an economic government" a matter of urgency.

But the notion of an economic government is very elusive. It is far from clear what kind of state or constitutional order that phrase conjures up. The French claim that the political construction they have in mind is not federalism. And when the Germans rather timidly suggest that federalism ought to be the goal, the French become, to say the least, evasive. Indeed, in a speech to the German Bundestag last week, French President Jacques Chirac derided the federal vision as "absurd."

So what is going on? Why haven't the French projects for Europe sparked a great constitutional debate? Why have supporters of further integration so often taken refuge in economic arguments about getting richer—while opponents take refuge in rather sterile defenses of national sovereignty?

The answer is that Europe has been the scene of a veiled competition among three forms of the state—French, German and British—to become the model for Europe as a whole. Despite some recent decentralization, the French model of the state remains an essentially bureaucratic one—one that concentrates administrative power with a minimum of constraints. Power is the name of the game. By contrast, the German model of the state is formally federal, and takes great care to disperse authority and power in an orderly way. The British form is different again—distinguished by its reliance on custom and precedent, its common-law character. Traditionally, the British model relies upon social deference and good manners to distribute power.

Which will prevail? Not the British model; it is too idiosyncratic. Yet the British have resolutely opposed a German-style federal model for Europe. Which leaves the French-style state—a bureaucratic model

that does not address the need for a formal dispersal of authority and power. France has stolen the march on Germany and Britain by projecting its centralized state system onto Europe via the rapid accretion of power in Brussels. This could have serious consequences for the political culture of Europe. The instincts of the French political class are technocratic rather than constitutional. The dispersal of power and democratic accountability are not values that it conspicuously defends.

Rather, the French political class puts a premium on consistency when it comes to policy: it cushions the harshness of market capitalism with welfare provisions, and it defends European interests against those of the outside world, not least America's. In their suspicion of Anglo-Saxon influences, the French tend to exaggerate potential conflicts of interest between Europe and the United States, while underestimating conflicts of interest within Europe.

The acceleration of European integration is the French response to German reunification. First a common currency and now a so-called common government are the price exacted by the French for their acquiescence in German reunification. In a sense, these projects will give France a hand in the government of Germany. Unfortunately, the French projects neglect the question of how a robust

democratic political culture can be shaped across Europe. What are the preconditions of self-government in a democratic society on a continental scale? That question suggests why the American example should be instructive. The Founding Fathers were able to take a number of informal conditions for granted when they sought to create a political union—a vigorous tradition of local self-government, an open political class dominated by lawyers, a consensus about the role of the state and, of course, a common language. These conditions helped federalism to foster a culture of consent in the United States.

Can Europe today match these conditions? It is very doubtful, at least in the short run. Yet these are the conditions that advocates of European political union—something approaching federalism—must begin to address. Any rush to political integration that turns federalism into little more than a mask for a unitary superstate risks opening up an enormous gap between Europe's elites and public opinion in the nation-states. If political union proceeds without public understanding and consent, the prospects for Europe will be bleaker than they have been since 1945.



Do it his way? Chirac, in the Reichstag, calls for economic union

SIEDENTOP, a faculty lecturer in political thought at Oxford University, is the author of "Democracy in Europe."