

Danger of a French Europe

French-style leadership will alienate millions, says Larry Siedentop

Three models of the state are in competition to become the model for the European Community as a whole.

The French model is essentially bureaucratic. The Constitution of the Fifth Republic gives a decisive advantage to the executive over the legislature. Policy is shaped by interests that are well placed to influence the executive, and formal checks and balances and publicity play little part. Because it amounts to little more than the formalisation of a centralised decision-making process, with a minimum of constraints, the French model can be exported relatively easily. Power is the name of the game.

The German model is at the other pole. Inspired by American federalism and the diversity of German states before unification, the German Constitution takes enormous trouble to create different spheres of authority and to protect each from the others — minimising the risk of encroachments from the federal government, not least by means of a powerful constitutional court. For the Germans, therefore, talk of a "federal" future for Europe means a future with strict constraints on the growth of central power and adherence to the rule of law. Authority is the name of the game.

The British model is characterised by informality, precedent and custom. In effect, it relies upon the existence of a distinct political class which implicitly agrees about the methods, if not the goals, of government. Custom is the name of the game.

However, the idiosyncratic form of the British state has become the problem. It is too embedded in a particular social context to make export possible. Yet the Government and political class of the UK have not faced up to this problem in their dealings with Europe. The model held up to Europe for emulation — with its emphasis on ad hoc develop-

ment — lacks clarity. All that can be said is that it requires more than mere economic association but less than federalism.

Apart from that, it remains guesswork. But to offer guesswork at this stage in the construction of Europe is extremely dangerous, for it is often accompanied by strong British attacks on the goal of a federal Europe which has long inspired democrats in Germany and smaller countries such as The Netherlands. In that sense, the reliance on the radically unclear British model of the state has been joined to rejection of the German federal model of the state for European construction.

What, then, remains? It is the French model, with its in-built predilection for power, rather than authority. And that is precisely what lies behind the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties and recent pressures to move ahead rapidly along their lines towards political integration, projecting something like the French state on to the rest of Europe.

I do not intend to suggest a French conspiracy. Rather, it is a matter of habit and attitude induced by the powerful administrative machine at the disposal of the French élite. When the French executive has decided that it wants something, it gets its way more often and more easily than is the case in most European states.

The kind of concerted economics and social planning which France goes in for, with government bringing together industry, trades unions and capital to pursue agreed targets, becomes far more difficult when public power is more dispersed. Anything like the French strategy for making Paris the transportation centre of Europe, based on a TGV train network, would be scarcely possible in the UK. The delays and muddle associated with the British rail link to the Channel Tunnel provide a tragicomic contrast.

So we must now ask whether it matters that something like the French model of the state may be projected on to Western Europe by way of Brussels. And the answer must be yes, it does.

The French model is the one least likely to foster a culture of consent in Europe. The ability of a central agency to impose its will quickly and despite widespread misgivings or against important local interests is calculated instead to foster a culture of suspicion and cynicism.

Recently, we have seen moves towards decentralisation in France. But changes in habits and attitudes take time. Meanwhile, the French élite remains an essentially bureaucratic one, dominated by graduates of ENA (the National School of Administration). They have had extraordinary success in the postwar period in rebuilding the fortunes of their country — domestically, through the series of Plans, and on a European scale, through the Common Market and the EU. For the new Europe is essentially a French design, and despite British obstruction and reservations emerging from Germany, the French project for Europe is on the point of succeeding.

But the French political class now finds itself in a dilemma. It cannot tell its own people that France is on the brink of carrying the day in Europe, because it might be overheard by the other people of Europe, particularly

Senators could act as a filter between political classes and the European elite



France's Lionel Jospin and Germany's Gerhard Schröder at the SPD party convention in Berlin

the Germans and the British — releasing a far more powerful current of opposition to the French project for Europe. The result of this dilemma is that the most likely way in which French policy might still be undone is through domestic strife within France itself. For here we come once again upon the drawback of a dirigiste political culture, a pattern in which the political class or élite loses touch with popular opinion, only finally to be called to account by widespread civil unrest, if not revolution.

Tell-tale signs are already present for those who care to read them. The debacle of the European Commission under Jacques Santer has reinforced a widespread perception that an overprivileged and unaccountable élite has misused the growing power of Brussels.

Another tell-tale sign is the serious gap that has opened between the peoples of Europe and their élite — between popular indifference or opposition to monetary union and the determination of national political classes, led by the French and abetted by the Germans, to push ahead with the project as rapidly as

possible. The peril is real. If the idea of Europe becomes associated primarily with the arrogance of unaccountable élites, the prospects for Europe are bleaker than they have been since 1945. For then the idea of Europe will divide rather than unite. It will divide nations within themselves and may even set nations against each other.

Can anything be done? The first thing is to face the truth. In the short run, there is no way of creating a political class for Europe, at least not a class which is open and has emerged in a morally acceptable way. To suggest otherwise is to be either naive or deceitful. In the middle to long term, habits and attitudes can be remoulded. And that is where those who are truly serious about the construction of a democratic Europe should now direct their attention.

First, we need to enhance the democratic character of national political classes in Europe through reforms which foster participation at local and regional levels. Recent events offer some encouragement. The French, the Spanish and, most recently, the British are strengthen-

ing regional identities, protecting local autonomy and opening out recruitment to the national political class.

A second requirement is to acknowledge that English has an indispensable role to play as the second language of Europe. Why should its role de facto have to be converted into a role de jure? Because the shared standards of accountability, the attitudes needed to convert nominal democracy into real democracy, require a common political idiom if they are to develop and flourish.

Finally, there are two direct measures that can and should be

If Europe is built without an open political class it will be ruled by civil servants

France's fingerprints are all over the new Europe

BRUSSELS IS an appendage of Paris and of the French political élite. That is true both of policy-making and recruitment. In part, French hegemony is a result of the coincidence that the construction of Europe has taken place at the same time as the renewal of France. The determination, born of defeat in 1940, to restore France's "proper" place in Europe was given a new impetus after 1958. De Gaulle pursued French interests intransigently, vetoing British membership and shaping the core policies of the Common Market.

The French were chiefly responsible for creating the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which has given them significant long-term financial advantages, and they have prevented any major reform of it. When, in 1999, the Schröder Government decided to seek reform, an atmosphere of crisis developed in Paris and the message went out to Brussels and Bonn that the CAP was a French national interest. It was not long before the Germans, in effect, desisted.

France, one of Europe's wealthiest nations, pays little into the European

coffers (the Netherlands, with a quarter of the population of France, pays six times as much). The French have also endeavoured to secure the most important European posts for French or French-sympathetic candidates. However, the European Commission during the presidency of Jacques Delors best reveals the extent to which a French conception of Europe's interests led to the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties, the single currency, the European Central Bank and pressure for further political integration.

Tomorrow: America's objective.

France welcomes German plan for federation of nation states



Fabius: backs Fischer

From Charles Bremner
in Paris

A GERMAN plan for a federal Europe was given authoritative French backing yesterday when Laurent Fabius, the Finance Minister, welcomed it as a road map for turning the European Union into a "federation of nation states".

M Fabius, who is Deputy Prime Minister in the Government of Lionel Jospin, broke with the caution shown so far by the Government towards the ambitious scheme drawn

up by Joschka Fischer, the German Foreign Minister. Herr Fischer's ideas were "important and very interesting," as a guide for the political organisation of Europe, he said.

The EU, which comes under French presidency in July, should proceed towards deeper integration led by a Franco-German "avant-garde" as suggested by the German minister, he added. By 2007, when the EU will mark its 50th anniversary of its founding Treaty of Rome, "it would be a fine aim for our generation to pre-

pare by then an adequate political structure... whether one calls it a federation of nation states or co-sovereignty," he said.

M Fabius's remarks contrasted with the cool reception given to the plan by M Jospin and President Chirac, who fear it risks alienating Britain and the Nordic states when France tries to win consensus on EU reforms later this year.

However, French public support for deeper integration was shown by an opinion poll yesterday in which 59 per cent

said they wanted France to support the Fischer plan. Only 33 per cent were opposed.

Addressing EU financiers and politicians, M Fabius said France would use its six-month presidency to extend the powers of the "Euro-11" committee of finance ministers from the single currency zone.

Created on French instigation and fiercely resisted by Britain, France wants the Euro-11 to become the effective "economic government" of the euro zone, balancing the powers of the European Central

Bank. M Fabius, who served as Prime Minister under President Mitterrand in the early 1980s, said the single currency group — soon to enlarge to 12 with Greece's adoption of the euro — was an example of the type of inner circle that Herr Fischer was calling for to lead the EU towards federation.

M Chirac and M Jospin also both spoke out yesterday on the need to shore up the beleaguered euro with more assertive political action by the leaders of the 11-member group.

M Fabius, who is one of the

most pro-European members of the Jospin Cabinet, said France would use its EU presidency to bring greater stability to the euro, which has begun a slow recovery over the past week after losing a quarter of its value against the dollar since its launch in January 1999. There was no justification for the weakness, he said. "The euro is not monopoly money, or monkey money as we say in France."

Pledging French determination to bring coherence to the management of what was fun-

damentally a strong currency, President Chirac said: "It may take time for markets to perceive this strength and our determination as politicians to pursue our objectives."

However, French and other European officials continued to fume yesterday over the gaffe committed last week by Romano Prodi, the President of the European Commission. Mr Prodi had said that he could imagine a situation in which a participating state could pull out of the currency arrangement.