

THE FEDERAL TRUST
for education & research

Enlightening the Debate on Good Governance

**Britain and Europe
yet another moment
of truth**

LORD HASKINS



European Essay No.27

A Definition of Federalism

Federalism is defined as 'a system of government in which central and regional authorities are linked in an interdependent political relationship, in which powers and functions are distributed to achieve a substantial degree of autonomy and integrity in the regional units. In theory, a federal system seeks to maintain a balance such that neither level of government becomes sufficiently dominant to dictate the decision of the other, unlike in a unitary system, in which the central authorities hold primacy to the extent even of redesigning or abolishing regional and local units of government at will.'

(*New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*)

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About the author:

Lord (Christopher) Haskins was born in 1937 in Dublin. He was educated at Trinity College Dublin, where he took an Honours degree in Modern History. He worked for Northern Foods from 1962 until 2002, becoming a director in 1967, Deputy Chairman in 1974 and Chairman from 1986 to 2002. In 1998 he became a Labour life peer.

Foreword

It is now clear that Britain is extremely unlikely to join the euro in this Parliament. Nor can it be taken for granted that it will do so in the next. While opinion polls show that a clear majority of British voters still expect Britain eventually to join the European single currency, the expected date of this eventuality recedes ever further into the distance. The following essay is an important contribution towards understanding just why so little progress has been made towards achieving the government's avowed desire to reinforce Britain's European position by taking the United Kingdom into the euro.

There are few better qualified to tell this story than Lord Haskins. Since the present government's election in 1997, he has been one of the most prominent advocates from business of early British membership of the single currency. It will become clear from what follows that, over the past six years, he has been a well-placed and acute observer of thinking and decision-making at the highest levels of government and business. His conclusion is a bleak one. The New Labour government, he believes, has failed until now to match its theoretical commitment to Britain's central role in Europe with a robust intellectual and political lead on the European debate in this country. In particular, the government has not been vigorous enough in combating the anti-European propaganda of the Eurosceptic media. The fruits of this neglect are now being harvested, and they constitute a fundamental threat to Britain's whole position in Europe.

It is against this unpromising background that Lord Haskins concludes his essay with a suggestion that will surprise many and shock some of his readers, namely his proposal for a joint referendum on the euro and the outcome of the constitutional Intergovernmental Conference next year. This is playing for high stakes, but what follows is intended above all as an antidote to the easy optimism which all too often colours the tactics and thinking of those in this country who want Britain eventually to play a more constructive and self-assured role within the European Union. There is nothing inevitable about Britain's joining the euro. For it to happen, much more determination and clear-sightedness will be demanded from its political advocates than they have usually shown in the past. Lord Haskins is surely right in his claim that a wide-ranging referendum next year would force politicians and electors alike to make up and speak their minds about Europe. In such a referendum, there would be no room to hide behind tests, criteria, conditions, forms of words or party lines. The strange twilight world which has been the European debate in this country for the past ten years would suddenly have a floodlight trained upon it. The light would be painful, but it might well be salutary.

There are hard messages in this essay for the government and pro-Europeans in this country to ponder. They are all the more powerful in coming from a distinguished businessman highly supportive of this government's domestic policy, who has never held back in his own eloquent advocacy of early British membership of the euro. The recent resignation of Alastair Campbell has sparked much discussion of a possible new approach by this government to the relationship between policy and presentation. Lord Haskins clearly believes that European policy is an area where such a new approach is not merely desirable, but essential and long overdue.

Brendan Donnelly
Director of the Federal Trust
September 2003

Britain and Europe

yet another moment of truth

by Lord Haskins

Britain's relationship with the European Union is today in crisis. We stand at a crossroads every bit as significant as our original refusal to participate in the early discussions about a Common Market in the 1950s or Harold Wilson's referendum in 1975. Two originally separate processes have come together and created this crisis, namely the euro and the recommendations of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's Constitutional Convention. The Constitutional Convention began its work only eighteen months ago, while Britain's indecision over the euro has lasted for fifteen years. By an extraordinary historical irony, the week that saw Gordon Brown give his long-awaited assessment of the 'five criteria' also saw Giscard produce his proposals for Europe's constitutional future. The political interaction between these two topics may well require the British people to reconsider its whole relationship with the European Union, including even the question of Britain's EU membership.

The European single currency

When Gordon Brown gave his 'definite maybe' to British membership of the euro in early June of this year, his announcement was, for the moment, the culmination of an agonising process which goes back at least to the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. John Major's government was torn apart by conflict between those who wanted Britain to join the single currency, or at least keep open the possibility of doing so, and those who saw joining the euro as politically or economically unacceptable in any circumstances. This highly public division caused great damage to British standing and prestige within the European Union.

It was widely hoped and believed at the time that the election of a New Labour government in 1997 would correct this position. It is certainly true that with the arrival of Tony Blair in Downing Street, a friendlier and more positive tone ran through British governmental rhetoric about our European partners. But even before becoming Prime Minister, Mr. Blair had given a number of hostages to fortune on the European single currency, which have both constrained him during his Premiership and created the ambiguity which has always underpinned New Labour's attitude to the European Union.

In retrospect, the turning point was in late 1996, when John Major, against the advice of his Chancellor Ken Clarke, acceded to Eurosceptic demands for a referendum on the euro. The Leader of the Opposition's almost immediate reaction was to do likewise. When asked why he had thought it necessary to make such a commitment, he replied that he remained unsure about his ability to win the following General Election, and wished to prevent the euro from becoming a damaging issue during the campaign. Further light was thrown upon the electoral preoccupations of Mr. Blair when shortly before the election itself he wrote an article for a tabloid newspaper on why he 'loved the pound.'

In the event, the Prime Minister would have easily won the 1997 General Election without committing himself to a referendum on the euro. In my view, it was a serious misjudgement on his part to bind his hands as he did, simply in order to make electoral victory doubly sure. He and the whole project of getting Britain into the single currency have suffered as a result. Following its other rhetorical and real undertakings on European issues in 1996 and 1997, New Labour's landslide majority in the latter year would have allowed the Prime Minister and his Chancellor to choose for themselves the timing of Britain's entry into the single currency.

After the 1997 General Election, the Prime Minister missed one further important European opportunity. It was widely expected in the late summer of 1997 that he would use his domination of public opinion to hold an 'enabling' referendum on the euro as soon as possible. Yet in September 1997, he forfeited a chance to end forty years of British ambivalence towards the EU. After confusing and in other circumstances laughable exchanges involving the Chancellor's Special Adviser, Downing Street, a mobile phone and the Red Lion public house, it was announced by the

Chancellor that no referendum on the euro would take place in the current Parliament and that the matter would be subjected to eventual review in the light of five 'economic tests' put together in some haste. These tests have ever since been the cause of the government's ambiguous approach to the euro. Their existence can be held to show that the government is committed to eventual membership of the single currency, when the time is ripe. But they can also be used as a pretext for indefinite delay if the perceived electoral interests of the Labour Party demand it.

Many observers believed in 1997, and have continued to believe since, that Gordon Brown was responsible for the decision to postpone a referendum on the euro. I am not so sure. I recall a conversation at the time with Philip Gould, the Prime Minister's main pollster, and his two American associates, James Carville and Stan Greenberg, who managed Bill Clinton's successful campaign in 1992. I pointed out that opinion polls seemed to show that 40 per cent of the electorate were already in favour of the euro, and suggested that the Prime Minister could surely swing a further 10 per cent in his favour during a referendum campaign. Carville's response was illuminating. He robustly informed me that, in Clintonian politics, the 'objective' was not to persuade doubters, but rather to find ways of being on the side of the doubting.

I believe that advice of this sort, and the attitudes which underlie it, have excessively influenced the Prime Minister ever since he became Leader of the Opposition in 1994. He has constantly argued that joining the euro was an economic and not a political decision. In consequence, he has allowed the ultra-cautious Treasury to take control of decision-making on the euro. Additionally, he has gone out of his way to avoid offending the Murdoch press and the *Daily Mail*, not merely on European issues, but over a whole range of other policies, particularly those falling under the Home Office. Ironically, this attempt to accommodate the Murdoch newspapers has simply encouraged the europhobic right-wing media to project themselves as the most effective source of opposition to the present government, replacing the enfeebled and discredited Conservative Party as the voice of political discontent.

This hesitancy at the top of the government explains why for the past six years so little progress has been made in putting the case for British membership of the euro, or indeed of the European Union itself. It has

been difficult at any time since September 1997, to believe that a referendum on the euro was imminent. The government left the Liberal Democrats, a handful of senior Labour grandees such as Roy Hattersley and Giles Radice, a limited number of isolated pro-euro Conservatives and a group of enthusiastic but politically inexperienced business people like myself, to challenge the increasingly paranoiac nationalism shown by much of the British press. As a result we have lost support for the project, a situation not helped by the relatively poor performance of the French and, especially, the German economies.

Until a year ago, eurooptimists such as myself persuaded ourselves that with a whole-hearted commitment from Blair and Brown, a referendum on the euro could still be won in the foreseeable future. But the war with Iraq has changed all that. Over the past year, and to the dismay of our major European partners, Britain was America's most energetic ally in its 'crusade' to rid the world of unacceptable regimes in Iraq and possibly other strategically significant countries of the Middle East such as Syria and Iran. The political consequences of this stance, taken largely in response to the fundamentally flawed and confused British doctrine of the 'special relationship' with the United States, can scarcely be overstated.

Particularly damaging was the impact of the Iraqi war on British public opinion. The jingoist elements of the British press seized on the reservations of France and Germany to fuel an unprecedented public hostility in this country to everything French and German. Cowardice, perfidy and ingratitude to America were among the milder of the accusations brandished. Even worse, senior Labour ministers joined this bandwagon in the weeks before the war, in a largely successful attempt to force uncertain backbenchers into the government lobby. Britain divided European opinion further by organising a letter of support for the US action which was signed by some EU members but opposed by others including France and Germany. The net result of these tactics has been to undermine the prospects of a successful referendum on the European single currency for the foreseeable future. It will not be easy or plausible for Labour ministers who have so roundly denounced their close neighbours in 2003 to urge closer integration with these same neighbours in 2004 or 2005.

Tragically, but predictably, military action has not led to a peaceful Iraq, and it is likely that British and American troops will have to remain

there for a number of years, with the risk of incurring increasing numbers of casualties. Iraq could well become as much of an obsession for Mr. Blair and for Mr. Bush as Vietnam was for Lyndon Johnson. Growing concerns about the validity of the arguments for starting the war threaten to weaken further the Prime Minister's credibility and therefore his capacity to lead a successful referendum campaign in favour of the euro.

The Convention

When the European Constitutional Convention began its work eighteen months ago, the British government hoped that the outcome of its work would successfully clarify the relationship between the European Union and its Member States. Mr. Blair and his colleagues believed that such an outcome would be helpful in winning a British referendum on the euro, tentatively planned for the autumn of 2003.

Although the Council of Ministers has yet to respond to the Convention's recommendations, its draft constitution seems a sensible and pragmatic document. Of its nature it is a compromise, too integrationist for those who want the European Union to be a simple free trading area, but too cautious for those who think many of Europe's problems derive from too little, rather than too much integration.

Unfortunately for the government, first public reactions in this country to the Convention's work have not been encouraging. British eurosceptics, led by Iain Duncan Smith, are already predicting unimaginable consequences if any British government were ever to sign a treaty incorporating a European constitution. No doubt Philip Gould's focus groups in Watford are already telling him that any such step would permanently estrange them from New Labour. As a result there is a real danger that the government will try to fudge the serious issues addressed by Giscard's Convention, rather than explain why the draft constitution is essential for the future evolution of the EU, and why it is very much in Britain's interest to endorse this constitution.

In reality, there are two aspirations at the heart of Giscard's Convention, one primarily administrative and the other more political. The administrative aspect of his work is to 'tidy up' and rationalise the various treaties signed by the EU's Member States over the years. Few could object to such an

attempt. Successive European treaties have produced an impenetrable thicket of procedures, powers and obligations which urgently need to be simplified and rationalised.

The political aspect of the Convention is more controversial, but equally necessary. The blunt truth is that enlargement of the EU to twenty-five members next year will render wholly inadequate the existing decision-making procedures of the Union. These procedures were conceived for six original participants, and have only imperfectly been adapted since. In order to make the enlarged body work, further pooling of sovereignty is inevitable, a concept already well established in the Union's evolution. We would not have the Single European Market today without the sovereignty-pooling permitted by the Single European Act, which Lady Thatcher so vigorously promoted in the mid-1980s.

In this regard, Giscard's proposals are relatively modest, foreseeing only a limited extension of qualified majority voting. He has not recommended any use of majority voting in foreign or defence policy, and its minimal application to indirect taxation matters. Even this latter proposal is unlikely to survive the negotiations of the European ministers at their Intergovernmental Conference later in the year. Other of Giscard's ideas are equally appropriate to an enlarged European Union. The creation, for instance, of a 'European Foreign Minister' will expedite negotiations with the rest of the world, helping the European Union to speak with one voice. In the same way, the involvement of the European Parliament in the election of the Commission President will strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the latter institution.

These rational, prudent and (some would even say) cautious proposals of the Convention have been widely misinterpreted and distorted by Eurosceptic commentators in this country. The misleading claim that they represent a massive erosion of British national sovereignty, coupled with the extreme anti-European mood generated by the war in Iraq, has generated political pressure for a referendum on the new European constitution. This pressure will increase when the government puts to Parliament the outcome of the forthcoming Intergovernmental Conference in the course of next year.

The future

To any objective observer in 1997, it would have appeared incredible that in 2003, six years after electing an 'enthusiastically pro-European' government, with a vast majority in Parliament and unchallenged public support, Britain should remain so isolated, so uncertain and so uncommitted to its European role.

I believe that the New Labour government has over the past six years achieved much more than is often recognised. Northern Ireland, although not yet politically stabilised, has seen an enormous reduction in political violence. Scotland and Wales have received important devolved powers, and Wales in particular is flourishing as a result. The British economy has performed better, and for a longer time, than ever previously in the twentieth century. The vast injection of cash into the public services is producing results, despite the marginally relevant ideological debate about foundation hospitals and university fees.

But Europe has become Tony Blair's Achilles heel. To his great disappointment, it is now highly unlikely that he will be able to call a referendum on the euro in the short term, although he will want to retain the option to do so at some, unspecified time in the future. He will be damaged by this procrastination, especially among two critical groups of New Labour supporters. The majority of Britain's manufacturers, including most multinationals, have until now given the government the benefit of the doubt on the matter of the single European currency, and trusted it to secure British membership of the euro in a foreseeable time-scale. This trust is rapidly disappearing. Many of those who trade extensively with the EU are already reacting by steadily moving their investment away from Britain and into the Eurozone, thus confirming one of the worst economic consequences of indefinite British exclusion from the single currency.

If Britain's membership of the euro continues to be indefinitely delayed, the solid one third of the British electorate which, despite all the propaganda and misinformation, remains committed to membership of the euro, will feel itself politically disenfranchised. This will have particularly negative implications for 'Britain in Europe,' the all-party campaign group, which has always been too dependent on business support, with New Labour maintaining a friendly distance.

It might well be years before a credible campaign specifically to join the euro could be mounted again. It would need, moreover, a substantial change to the British economic and political scene to provide the appropriate background. Perversely, the myth (for it is a myth) that the British economy is far stronger than that of the Eurozone, will probably have to evaporate as a precondition for a successful referendum on the euro. It may take an economic crisis to convince the British public that membership of the EU is critical to the country's wellbeing.

Politically, as long as the Conservative Party is run by right-wing anti-Europeans, it has little chance of winning a General Election, but every chance of rallying crude anti-European sentiment with the help of the right-wing media. I remain convinced that the obsessive euroscepticism of today's Conservative Party is a barrier to its own aspirations for power. But the unyielding opposition of the second largest political party of our country to the prospect of our ever joining the euro is also a formidable obstacle for any future pro-euro campaign to overcome in a referendum.

As long as Britain remains outside the euro, it is not easy to be optimistic about our future relations with the rest of the EU. In the next five years, the ten new EU members are committed to participation in the single currency. In that period, Sweden and Denmark may well also have decided to join. As the lone outsider, Britain would then see her influence and credibility within the EU slip rapidly away. Marginalised within Europe, the UK will be strongly affected by EU economic strategy, but increasingly unable to influence it. The single currency will be weaker because of Britain's absence, thus increasing the resentment of our partners. The political centre of gravity will move further east if British influence reduces and understandable protectionist influences will revive for the same reason. British ambivalence about Europe could end up by undermining liberal economic opinion within the EU, thus making it even more unappealing to the sceptical British public. Those hostile to British membership of the Union will feel able to go on pressing their fundamentally implausible case for closer ties with America and the progressive dismantling of Britain's EU membership. Mr. Duncan Smith's demand for a complete re-negotiation of Britain's EU treaty obligations would never be accepted by the other members, so that the logical outcome of his argument would be a virtual withdrawal from the EU.

Yet it remains the case that on the central political and social questions Britain's views are far more in line with those of her EU partners than those of the US. Despite all the humbug and confusion arising from the sentimental rhetoric about our 'special relationship' with the United States, Britain shares European concerns about the traditional American bias in favour of Israel in the Middle East. Britain and Europe are sharply opposed to American attitudes on the environment. Europe, including Britain, takes a notably more balanced approach to the question of tackling terrorism than does the United States. Britain's social agenda, now and in the foreseeable future, will be rooted in values more prevalent in Europe than the US. The latter's continuing support for capital punishment would disqualify it for EU membership. Britain is the champion of free trade in the EU, but has experienced the hypocrisy of the public commitment of the US to trade liberalisation, while simultaneously acting unilaterally to protect its farm and steel interests from competition. Britain recognises the importance of promoting an effective European security system, because it privately understands that its close military alliance with the US exists to protect American rather than British interests. This last reality was brought home to Mrs. Thatcher with particular bitterness when President Reagan invaded the Commonwealth country Grenada, of which Queen Elizabeth is head of state, without informing the British government beforehand.

A solution?

The British government has two options in developing its EU policy – to fudge, which has been the preferred route for most of the past half century, or to put the whole issue of EU membership, including participation in the euro, and signing up to the constitution, to the British people in a referendum.

Prevarication has worked in the past, and will certainly not precipitate an immediate crisis in Britain's relationship with the EU. The other members would prefer us in the European club, albeit on much more detached terms than any one else. But a crisis would be inevitable if a referendum on the constitution was held and lost – a situation which might also arise in other 'referendum bound' countries like Ireland.

My fear nevertheless is that even maintaining a status quo in Britain's relationship with the EU may be impossible if the eurosceptics continue to go unchallenged and people fail to understand the consequences of a progressive erosion of the relationship with the EU. If this leads to a Conservative government committed to a wholesale renegotiation of Britain's treaty obligations, then a crisis is inevitable, because the other 24 countries would not, and could not, agree to one country being allowed separate conditions of membership of the EU.

I believe therefore that prevarication will not suffice, and that decisive action must be taken in order to pre-empt a further rise in media-led europhobia, and a creeping emotional and eventual political separation of the United Kingdom from Europe. I do not think it will be sufficient simply to refuse to hold a referendum on the European constitution and hope that circumstances will allow a euro referendum in the not too distant future. I am not at all convinced that it will be easier to hold a euro referendum in five years time than it is today or next year. Equally, a defensively minded refusal to hold a referendum, buttressed by unconvincing reassurances about the dangers supposedly deriving from the European constitution, will do nothing to convince the British electorate of the importance and benefits of EU membership.

I am not generally an enthusiast for government by referendums. I have already stated that I believe that the Prime Minister's commitment in 1996 to hold a referendum on the euro was a mistake. I am highly suspicious of the motives of many of those now calling for a referendum on the recommendations of the Constitutional Convention, an absurd proposition before the work on the Convention has even been finished. But I have concluded that a referendum on EU membership itself is now essential if the erosion of Britain's relationship with Europe is to be arrested. This referendum would concern both the constitution and currency. If won, it would resolve permanently the debilitating half-heartedness and prevarication with which Britain has approached its most important international relationship over the past decades. If lost, it will do no more than make manifest a crisis which is anyway now coming to a head. The combination of self-imposed exclusion from the euro and irrational opposition to the European constitution can only be resolved by a referendum on the broader issue of Britain's continuing membership in the EU.

What I am suggesting is undoubtedly risky. A negative decision in a referendum might be a prelude to the economic and political catastrophe of Britain leaving the EU, as would be permitted under the new constitution. There are some in this country who would welcome such an outcome. Iain Duncan Smith, for instance, seems to favour continued British EU membership only on terms very similar to withdrawal. But those of us who believe that such an attitude is irresponsible and unrealistic, should now have the courage and the confidence to put the issue to the British public, and hope that it will be as responsible as it was in 1975. I believe that, confronted with the stark question of membership, the British people would see where their true economic, political and cultural interests lie.

I have criticised the Prime Minister and his government for being too cautious on many European questions, so that, as a result, there is more antipathy to the EU than there was in 1997. I accept that a third of the population appears to have an implacable hostility to the concept of EU membership, but would also point out that a further third is enthusiastically in favour. The issue in a referendum therefore would be to get a majority of the uncommitted third to come on side. Faced by the stark reality of the alternatives, that target can be achieved.

If Tony Blair opts for the fudge, Britain's relationship with the EU will deteriorate, and one of his greatest political aspirations – to bring Britain finally to the heart of Europe – would have been destroyed. This would mean, sadly, that Blair (like Clinton) would go down in history as a man who was brilliant at winning elections, but unable to use his huge electoral mandate to persuade the British people to come to terms with the realities, and the opportunities of the modern world. But if the Prime Minister fought and won a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU, including signing up to the euro and the constitution – and I believe that he would win such a vote – then his place in history would be assured.

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