

Why is federalism so misunderstood ?



Weltmacht Europa
Puissance Europe

Declaration of Unity

Some simplistic answers

- Because it is so badly explained (but how on earth could I pretend to do better than past generations ?)
- Because federalism-bashing is trendy (but aren't we able to reverse the trend, and let reason prevail over fashion ?)
- Because federalism is unvoiced (are federalists so shy at shouting louder to make them listened to, or at least heard ?)
- Because federalism is taboo (who may find federalism embarrassing or offensive ? Who is able to prevent Europeans to talk about federalism ?)

Some more elaborate answers

Simplistic answers are pointing to opinion makers : namely national politicians and the media.

- Spinelli in the fifties, in a UEF manifesto, identified those fighting against federalism : « the national sovereignty profiteers », i.e. those who hold and exercise national power, those who are in charge of national centralized, hierarchical, top-down structures.
- We may generalize to all those (incl. the national media) whose positions and habits would be shattered by unity.

What do they fear ?

- As Beveridge said : « federalism is dispersion of power ». Then, it is quite natural that people profiteering of huge concentrations of power in nation states or national strategic activities (mainly energy and information) are against us.
- What national politicians fear most is a European liberal transnational democracy. Therefore, they have rather a « federalism of executives » (as highlighted by Habermas) than checks and balances or the « unintentional empire » by the stronger (as highlighted by Beck).

The ultimate fear

- To someone telling him the ECSC was a great leap in the unknown, Monnet answered : « Et alors ? (so what?) »
- Uncertainty is a daily component of human lives, whether individual or social, as Keynes pointed out.
- We may add that apparent certainties are most of the time denials of reality, some ideological veil aimed at concealing the real world, just as the nation is now.
- The status quo might even convey more uncertainties, not to speak of risks, than the federal leap.

A more in-depth, if not final, answer

IT'S THE CULTURE, STUPID !

- Most of the European continent, and continental countries more than the British Isles, have inherited a nation state culture in the historical context of the European system of sovereign states, and national wars.
- Our political culture, even when democratic, republican or not, is still a command top-down culture. With a legacy of absolutist and imperial features. A centre prevails.
- Therefore, an ingrained reluctance to think Europe otherwise led to the famous « supranationality quarrel »

How to sort things out ?

- Let me remind you of an idea by a former UEF president and fellow economist, John Pinder : federalism is not supranational, but juxtational, meaning common institutions don't come above, but side by side with member states.
- It is not a matter, in the political field, if not in the legal one, to be above, but rather apart from.
- It is a democratic issue : each and every citizen should have equal (and equidistant) access to two separate branches of government, the federal one and his (or her) member state one.

The federal and State governments are in fact but different agents and trustees of the people, constituted with different powers, and designed for different purposes.

James Madison, Federalist, No. 46