Centro d'Eccellenza

JEAN MONNET

THE EU AND THE WORLD: NEW CHALLENGES AND TRENDS
27 IDEAS FROM THE ERASMUS GENERATION
Faculty of Political Science, University of Florence, 31 May-1 June 2012

'On Leadership'

By
Nicolas Kostov and Rosa Goodman
University College London

Nicolas Kostov Rosa Goodman
nicolas.kostov@ucl.ac.uk
rosa.goodman@ucl.ac.uk

The UK, at times, suffers from a political superiority complex. Some of the country's more vocal politicians and commentators act towards Europe as if the empire remained in-

tact and the gun blasts of WWII could still be heard threatening the British coast. This 'little islander' mentality can amuse of course, but it is thought provoking that life in the UK is more cosmopolitan than almost all other parts of Union, and the vast majority of the population is extremely open minded and progressive in its attitudes. Why, then, the hostility towards the Union?

Because hostility there undoubtedly is. Britain is the birthplace and thriving bee hive of euroscepticism. According to the ICM/Guardian poll carried out in October 2011, a large majority of Britons (70%) want a referendum on Britain's membership with 49% saying they would prefer Britain to leave the EU compared to just 40% saying they prefer to stay in. The question is not whether Britain is European or should be in Europe-that can safely be assumed. It is the political system that has been built up over the past half century which is the cause of so much contention, confusion and outrage.

Having conducted a number of interviews ourselves, the general perception on the Island is that the EU is snowballing defiantly towards further integration, further remoteness and further autocracy whilst bypassing the current problems and ignoring public misgivings. The EU is completely out of touch with British eurocitizens. Of the 100 people we interviewed in various locations across London, only 4 could name both the President of the Commission and the President of the Council. All the while, it is EU institutions that legislate the majority of new laws enacted in the country.

The challenge for the EU is to get closer to the British public, to harness its renowned enthusiasm and undoubted creativity to advance the EU project. At the moment, EU debate in the country's media is most often highly polarized and of little use: In or out? Europhile or eurosceptic? The Commission recognizes this is no way to hold a public debate and has generally blamed the British press for mugging off the public and failing the Brits as their fourth estate (Spiering, 2004: 132). There is some truth to this, but we believe the answer lies not in lambasting the dogged British press, but in fostering real debate within the EU institutions themselves.

Too many cooks

An emphasis on compromise and collective identity are key reasons why the EU has, from its very inception, relied on a form collective leadership to take the Union forward. In an attempt to override egoistical national interests and interstate conflict, the founding fathers successfully built institutions aimed at diffusing power, putting the accent firmly on technocracy. Periods of successful integration coincided with the presence of various groups of leaders who together set priorities, resolved conflicts and articulated the

mission and role of the Union (Dimitrakopoulos, 2008: 293). The key schism was between those who wanted more 'Europe' and those who wanted less.

The reasons for setting up this system, however, are not reasons to sustain it. Collective leadership is today institutionalized within the EU but its limitations have steadily been bubbling to the surface. This type of leadership undermines clarity, promptness and accountability. The basic economic and political edifices of Europe have now been built and the debate is increasingly shifting from 'more or less Europe' to 'what kind of Europe do we want?' The position occupied by technocracy is already under strain (see Cini, 2008: 127). The current inability of EU leaders to respond to the new challenges faced by the EU begs the question whether the collective model remains adequate.

For a collective decision making system to achieve anything, there needs to be a number of coordinating factors. In his book 'Governing by Committee,' Baylis argues the need for a dominant conception of material interests, a mobilizing set of ideas, and a mature institutional arrangements (Baylis, 1989). For a while, these coordinating factors were present at EU level and collective leadership worked.

The re launch of the single market project in the 1980s provides an impressive illustration of what collective leadership, united with respects to both material interests and a mobilizing set of ideas, can achieve at the EU level. The project was energized by the big name quartet of Delors, Kohl, Mitterand, and Margaret Thatcher, the latter seeing policies as an extension of what she was trying to achieve in the UK. The paradigm behind EMU and the single market was distinctly neo-liberal, with the various national governments all agreeing that the single market was an effective tool to modernize and reenergize their ailing national economies. This common idea allowed leaders to work together, albeit with varying degrees of harmony, in the same EU wide collective leadership. Another key adhesive keeping the EU firmly glued together was its potential for peaceful resolution of conflict.

If a collective leadership is too atomized, however, nothing gets done. Today there is a lack of unifying ideals. The neo liberal policy paradigm has been losing its automatic legitimacy for years and, already pushed up against the ropes, it was dealt another heavy blow by the 2008 financial crisis. Arguably, one neo-liberal agenda (fiscal prudence and welfare cuts) is in the process of replacing another (deregulation and financial globalization), but it has so far failed to garner the support across EU institutions to drive the agenda forward. Furthermore, as successive generations go through their entire lives without experiencing war, the emotive idea of ensuring peace in Europe is also being detached from the EU project.

Moving on to Baylis' third requirement, a mature institutional arrangement, it has been widely argued that the existing institutional arrangement has shielded both the Commission and Council of Ministers from discussion going beyond the need to build Europe (Dimitrakopoulos, 2008: 298). The fact that neither institution had an ideological component until 2004, together with the more generalized blurring of the left/right distinction in politics, has meant that citizens were deprived of the traditional means of understanding political discourse at EU level. In essence, the EU's policy making has gone on for 50 years without the challenge of a political opposition, without critical media scrutiny of every new proposal and law and the feedback this may engender, and without the reality checks occasioned by politicians submitting themselves, their record, and their proposals periodically to first order electoral approval.

Within the constraints of time and space, the Commission and the European Council in particular merit a brief additional mention for the key role they previously played in instituting collective leadership. Ideologically speaking, Barroso's current college is probably more coherent than it has ever been (Mahony, 2009). To be an effective component of the collective leadership structure, however, the Commission must also be seen to be credible. This is undermined when the Commission shies away from taking difficult decisions, for example concerning the desirability of limited Eurobonds. An emphasis on ideology to renew leadership also presupposes the Commission will stop shielding behind its technocratic label and take the bold step of going against the inclinations of some of the stronger member states. The Commission's handling of the current Eurozone crisis and the lack of political big names in the current College (in contrast to the Prodi Commission) do not provide much scope for optimism. Guerot claims the Commission has not played a pivotal role since the Delors Commission (2006: 2).

The European Council, meanwhile, has acquired an increasingly prominent role in the running of the EU since the 1990s. Some argue this signals a move towards intergovernmentalism. The increasing frequency of intergovernmental conferences as well as their expanding agendas certainly point in this direction. The potential of the European Council as a source of collective leadership, however, was undermined by successive enlargements in 2004 and 2007. As alluded to above, there is increasing disagreement between the member states. Furthermore, Magone argues the immediate need to deal with the deficiencies of the Nice treaty meant the new members have not been socialized into the "consensus focused decision style (Magone, 2008, 193; Hix, 2008: 125)." David Cameron recently pointed out that there have been 18 EU summits since he became Prime Minister little more than two years ago, and none of them has produced anything remotely resembling a solution.

Thus collective leadership seems adequate for discussions on how to build Europe but its ability to steer the EU ship effectively in more nuanced and divisive waters is questionable. In its present form, the EU operates what Revel has termed a 'logic of powerlessness ' due to a fear of a centralized regime. This polycentric set up makes Brussels faceless and anonymous to the British public. Nobody really knows who is responsible for policy; is it the European Council? Is it the European Commission? Or the European Parliament, the ECB, the Eurogroup? In the words of Haywood: "there are too many leaders and not enough followers (2008, vi)." Key lines of accountability are muddled and with the current lack of a dominant conception of material interests, a mobilizing set of ideas, or a mature institutional arrangements; the policy results are a pale and often ineffective compromise (Dimitrakopoulos, 2008: 289).

Great team, one leader

A quick study of the classic pieces on representative democracy yields an incredible breadth of views but also one very relevant area of consensus: democracy is about leadership and leadership selection. Alexander Hamilton defended the notion of a single leader with an appeal to 'energy' and 'unity.' John Stuart Mill, writing a century later, argued that: 'responsibility is null when nobody knows who is responsible. There must be one person who receives the whole blame of what is well done, the whole blame of what is ill.' Max Weber was critical of collective leadership for a different reason, saying it inhibits precise, uniform, clear and prompt decision making (Baylis, 1989: 4-6). The multiplicity of interactions between the various institutions in Brussels feeds suspicions of sell out that are easily exploited by demagogues and the mass media.

The single most effective remedy to British apathy, we believe, and the one we are proposing, is for the EU to stop deliberately shunning the institution of an overriding leadership. There is pressing need for a respected leader with stature and charisma, a sort of Mr Europe, to communicate the work of the EU and the European project effectively and persuasively to the peoples of Europe. We had a brief taster session of loud and committed leadership in the shape of Nicolas Sarkozy's period at the head of the Council and Dinan believes this was key to get things done (2010: 114).

Winners and Losers

Simon Hix in his book 'What's wrong with Europe and how to fix it,' argues Europe is now ready for 'limited democracy.' He points to the institutional design and the pattern of

elite behavior, where contestation is accepted and losers accept the legitimacy of winners (2008: 4). Something approaching the Westminster model may be difficult at EU level because of the grand coalitions naturally required but a government-opposition style arrangement, with individual leaders at the helm, is possible. A majority coalition in the European Parliament must dominate policy making. There should also be an open battle for the role of Commission President with programs for each candidate, public debates, flags, speeches, the lot. This would get the media following the Brussels merry go round properly for the first time.

Democracy based on competitive elections would provide these leaders with legitimate power and a mandate to undertake reform and may go some way to solving policy gridlock, the democratic deficit and the lack of popular legitimacy. When it comes to beating their political rivals, leaders are instantly more innovative. Political contests also force politicians to explain their ideas clearly. The admission by a senior EU commission official to Peter Anderson that he rarely appears on the BBC because he assumes that the relevant program will be given a eurosceptic bias, is telling (Anderson, 2005: 169). The EU desperately needs a plan and a legitimate coalition is far more likely to come up with the goods than the present arrangement (Hix, 2008: 98).

Conclusion

The EU is a historical achievement but it could and must do better. It has the potential to become truly open, accountable and interesting to the British electorate. The challenges it currently faces such as the eurozone crisis, migration across its borders, the need for sustainable energy or external relations are all political and call for political leadership and political debate. Leadership entails choice, values and priorities, it is about conflict. If the EU stubbornly persists with collective leadership then the negative spiral in which it is trapped may well continue. The sorry plight of the leaderless occupy movement provides a stark illustration of the need for leaders.

Works Cited:

Baylis, Thomas. Governing by Committee: Collegial Leadership in Advanced Societies. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989.

Dimitrakopoulos, Dionyssis. Collective leadership in leaderless Europe: sceptical view. In Hayward, Jack (Ed), Leaderless Europe. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Cini, Michelle. Political leadership in the European Commission: The Santer and Prodi Commissions, 1995-2005. In Hayward, Jack (Ed), Leaderless Europe. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Hix, Simon. What's Wrong with Europe & How to Fix it. Cambrdige, UK: Polity press, 2008.

Spiering, Menno. British Euroscepticism. In Harmsen Robert and Menno Spiering (Eds), Euroscepticism: Party politics, national identity and European integration. New York: Rodopi Press, 2004.

Guerot Ulrike. "Political Leadership for the European Union." Online, 2006. <http://www.epin.org/new/files/06_Guerot_leadership.pdf>

Magone, José. Leaderless Enlargement? The Difficult Reform of the New Pan European Political System. In Hayward, Jack (Ed), Leaderless Europe. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Hayward Jack. Inhibited Consensual Leadership within an Independent Confederal Europe. In Hayward, Jack (Ed), Leaderless Europe. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Anderson, Peter. A flag of convenience? Discourse and motivations of the London based Eurosceptic Press. In Harmsen Robert and Menno Spiering (Eds), Euroscepticism: Party politics, national identity and European integration. New York: Rodopi Press, 2004.

Mahony, Honor. "Barroso has full house of commissioner nominees." EUObserver. 24/11/2009. <http://euobserver.com/9/29043>

Dinan, Desmond. "Institutions and Governance: A new treaty, a newly elected parliament and a new Commission." Journal of Common Market Studies. August 2010. Vol 48,No s1: 95-118