

EU – Back to the Drawing Board

Introduction

The Liberal Party has for at least a century been at the forefront of internationalist political parties. It has constantly advocated that nations should co-operate with each other and find suitable structures for co-operation rather than resort to war.

In recent years the Liberal Party has been very critical of the democratic deficit within the EU and the waste and bureaucracy created by that body. It has campaigned against the centralising of power. It is particularly critical of Ireland being asked to vote again in a referendum because they didn't get the "right result" the first time.

Background

The "F" word for many years has been "Federal" yet this word has been used as one of abuse rather than with any correct understanding of federal structures.

It has been nonsensical that those reactionaries who did not want devolution to the nations of Scotland and Wales complained at the time that if we had a "Federal UK" it would tear the United Kingdom apart. Those same reactionaries, when talking about Europe, talk of "a Federal Super State" and complain that this would destroy the individual nations' rights and tie the countries much too tightly to each other.

Clearly federalism cannot both "tear apart" and "tie too tightly" at the same time.

This reactionary politics is particularly evident if we look at UKIP. It claims to support the rights of individual nations yet its very name suggests it has little regard to the different nations which make up the United Kingdom. In fact its website refers to Scotland and Wales as "regions".

One can imagine the shock horror with which they would lambast the EU if it called England or the UK a "region" of Europe. If UKIP were consistent they would have separate English, Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh organisations. They would then need a structure to hold them together and the sensible way to do this would be for UKIP to have a federal structure.

Federal structures are an integral part of British organisations (see Appendix A). A properly constituted federal structure can ensure that the powers of the constituent bodies cannot be usurped by the co-ordinating body. They therefore reinforce the powers of the member bodies and keep power at the level at which it is designed by those constituent bodies.

The Democratic Deficit

The fact that nations who had been regularly at war with each other for centuries decided to work together and for this to be influenced by democratic elections is a step forward in the progress of democracy.

The problem is that the power of those elected, ie the Parliament, is severely limited. The real power lies with the Council of Ministers rather than the “faceless bureaucrats” which is the usual criticism.

All legislation coming out of the EU has been agreed by Conservative and Labour Ministers over the years. The problem is that it is done in negotiations in which the debate is not open to the public which is an essential safeguard in any democratic system.

The Conservative and Labour Ministers therefore enjoy exercising their power without public accountability in the knowledge that whatever they have done will not be blamed on them but rather on the faceless bureaucrats of Europe.

The parliament is a fairly toothless body where the MEP's, though elected for the purpose, have very little power to exercise their power on behalf of their electorate'

Recommendation 1

That the power to agree legislation be put in the hands of the European Parliament where it is subject to open debate and public scrutiny.

Recommendation 2

That the EU be re-formulated as a federal structure in which there is a presumption that power resides with the nations of the EU and can only be exercised by the EU where the nations agree there is a need for strategic level action at the European level.

MEPs

One of the obvious failings of the EU is that, particularly in the large regions, the vast majority of the public have no idea of the name and views of their MEP. One of the reasons for this is that there are too many and so do not regularly appear on local television and radio.

It can be seen from the elections for the Mayor of London that where there are a small number of candidates there is quite a large recognition by the public of those candidates. There would, therefore, be a benefit in reducing the number of MEPs so that they are more recognised and their views are better known and in this way they would be more accountable.

The other advantage of having fewer MEPs is that they would thereby be forced to concentrate on the larger strategic matters which are important rather than the petty bureaucratic matters which people find so frustrating.

Recommendation 3

The number of MEPs be reduced to approximately half the current number. We accept that for small nations and regions this may be problematic.

However we believe it is a problem to be overcome rather than continuing with the current massive number of MEPs.

Public Debate

Because the EU debate tends to be on the mainland of Europe, the British media take very little interest in it. It is rare to see MEPs speeches and for the positions they have taken to be publicly questioned.

Reducing the number of MEPs would make it more likely that they would be covered on local radio and television. However, we feel there should be some structure for them to be answerable within the UK.

Requiring them to answer for their actions we re-inforce the idea that they are accountable locally but it would also mean that important issues would become the subject of local public debate and interest

Recommendation

We recommend that there be a Committee of Parliament to which the MEPs are required to attend. At this Committee Members of Parliament could question them on the decisions they are making and on their voting record.

The recent elections showed the public is very critical of the EU. They also showed that the political parties avoid debate on issues with which the EU is concerned. There was also no debate about what internationalist alternatives there might be for co-operation between the countries of Europe.

This paper aims to open up discussion to what positive steps forward might be taken.

Rob Wheway
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Appendix A

The following are a brief list of federal organisations from within the UK. These were extracted from a Google search of the internet. The list could have been considerably longer as there were hundreds listed. No attempt has been made to check the status of their constitution or even if each organisation is still active. However, it can be seen that the idea of a federal structure is one which people in the UK are happy to live with.

Federations

The Federation of Small Businesses	The Football Supporters' Federation
Federation of Master Builders	Children's Heart Federation
Food and Drink Federation	The Packaging Federation
National Housing Federation	Federation of City Farms and
Retail Motor Industry Federation	Community Gardens
Biosciences Federation	Builders Merchants Federation
Glass and Glazing Federation	National Trainers Federation
British Plastics Federation	The Police Federation for Northern
The Law Centres Federation	Ireland
Metropolitan Police Federation	Talking News Federation
Federation of Tour Operators	National Market Traders Federation
British Marine Federation	National Federation of Fish Fryers
British Motorcyclists Federation	National Federation of Women's
Police Federation	Institutes
British Equestrian Federation	British Triathlon Federation
Commonwealth Games Federation	Federation of Sports and Play
English Chess Federation	Associations
British Property Federation	National Federation of Young Farmers'
Home Builders Federation	Clubs
Carers Federation	General Federation of Trade Unions
English Federation of Disability Sport	Scottish Fishermen's Federation
The Organic Food Federation	

Federal

The Federal Trust for Education and Research
Federal Union

International Federations

Again this is a very brief list and many more could have been added:

International Guide Dog Federation
International Hockey Federation
World Croquet Federation
International Banking Federation

Confederations

A confederation is a form of federal structure

NHS Confederation

Confederation of British Industry

Construction Confederation

International Student Travel Confederation

British Ceramic Confederation

The Confederation of Aerial Industries Ltd

Agricultural Industries Confederation

Confederation of Roofing Contractors

Confederation of British Metalforming

Confederation of Passenger Transport

National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations

Confederation of Co-operative Housing

The British Glass Manufacturers' Confederation

Confederation of Community Groups