

The Ideal of Federalist Europe: A Historical Survey

Masahiko Fukagawa

1. Introduction

The ideal of European integration has been gradually compromised since Winston Churchill advocated European federalism, proposing ‘a kind of United States of Europe’ in his speech in Zurich in 1946 (Jones, 2001, p.7). We can safely say that the Union’s institutional framework has been influenced by both federal and confederal ideas. In other words, the history of European integration has been characterized by confrontation between federalism and confederalism.

The EU is going to advance not only with economic but also with political integration. The purpose of this paper is to examine to what extent the European Union is federal and also examine Siedentop’s phrase, ‘Europe is not yet ready for federalism’ by discussing the issues related to the strengths and weaknesses of the European Union.

2. Federation or confederation?

2-1. Federalism

There are two main streams of thought with regard to the European integration among European politicians, federalism and confederalism. Siedentop states that federalism is ‘the

right goal for Europe' (Siedentop, 2000, p.231). We will begin our discussion by considering the question of what federalism is. The federal integrationists are represented by Robert Schuman, the French Foreign Minister, and Jean Monnet, the first President of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), who is also revered by European federalists as 'the father of Europe' (Milward, 2001, pp.16-17). It may be appropriate to start with considering how these theories have influenced European integration.

Bainbridge defines federation as follows: 'federation is a form of political organization characterized by a division of responsibility between a central authority and component parts (usually states, regions or provinces) enjoying autonomy in certain fields' (Bainbridge, 2000, pp.278-279). Furthermore, the federalist approach involves 'the creation of powerful institutions above the level of the nation-states' (Jones, 2001, p.9). A substantial degree of state sovereignty would be transferred to these supranational institutions. Federalism is one of the influential visions about reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War.

2-2. Confederalism

Next, it will be useful to examine confederalism, the opposite idea of federalism. Confederation is characterized by a weaker central authority and lays more emphasis on the independence of the constituent parts than in the case of federation (Bainbridge, 2000, p.83). Jones views a confederation as a looser arrangement than a federation, in that the

participating units retain a higher degree of independence in the former. The central governing body in confederations tends to be more limited in its powers. (Jones, 2001, p.41) The confederal integrationists are represented by Charles De Gaulle, the French President, who was opposed to European federalism and favoured a ‘Europe of states’ known as a *Europe des patries*, as opposed to Churchill’s vision of ‘United States of Europe’ (Jones, 2001, p.17). With these two major integration theories in mind, we will now take a look at the issue of the Franco-German entanglement and how their relationship has influenced the integration process.

2-3. The differences among the integration concepts among major countries

Major members have embraced different views concerning the future path of the integration, though they agree in principle to the necessity of European integration. While Germany supports federalism explicitly, France is opposed to European federalism, advocating the looser form of confederalism. Moreover, the UK is opposed to abandonment of national sovereignty, and aims at intergovernmentalism, which is also a looser form of cooperation between national governments in specific fields while nation states retain their sovereignty in other fields (Bainbridge, 2000, p.329). Furthermore, the UK finds the leadership of France and Germany in the process of the integration undesirable.

Particularly sharp difference of opinion about the approach to European integration lies between France and Germany, because of differences in political tradition and historical experience (Goldmann, 2001, p.114). In France, the sovereignty of the people is what traditionally legitimizes state power, where the nation has been fused with the state since 1789. In Germany, on the other hand, the sovereignty is constitutionally divided between the federal government and the constituent states. The political intentions of Germany and France have been intricately entangled in the formation of the EU. Siedentop points out that radically different political traditions of these major powers in the EU are in confrontation. The current European integration is based on France's model, being centralized and bureaucratic, as opposed to a federal and democratic model like Germany's.

The French aim behind its model, in Siedentop's view, is to weaken the influence of economic and political power of Germany in the Community (Siedentop, 2000, pp.105-107). This is because France had suffered grievously from German militarism and expansionism, far more than either Britain or the United States (Dinan, 1999, p.19). The purpose of France is expressed well by Calingaert, when he says the following: 'France seeks to promote its interests through the EU' (Calingaert, 1996, p.106). This requires some further explanation. Milward states the purpose of France as follows, French diplomacy made it clear that integration was 'an attempt to restore France as a major national force by creating an integrated area in Western Europe which France would dominate politically and

economically' (Milward, 2001, pp.16-17). France has always dominated the political design of the EU. This sensitive Franco-German relationship, as stated above, has become one of the obstacles to realizing a federal Europe.

The idea of Joshka Fischer, the German foreign minister, is significant when we consider the goal of European integration. He made a speech entitled 'From Confederacy to Federation' in Berlin in May 2000 (Jones, 2001, p.46). Fischer emphasized that the foundation of integration is the nation state. The completion of European integration can only be successfully conceived if it is done on the basis of a division of sovereignty between the EU and the nation state. To be concrete, the foreign minister proposed the creation of a European federation with 'a written constitution, a government and a two-chamber parliament' (Jones, 2001, p.100). One of the purposes of Fischer's proposal is to clarify the division of sovereignty between the Union and the nation states by a European constituent treaty. Fischer's proposal was intended to establish a 'lean' European Federation. In April 2001, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder took over Fischer's idea and proposed an EU federal constitution. This was welcomed by the European federalist group. If this had been realized, it would have contributed to the solution of the democracy problem, which we will discuss in the following chapter.

On the other hand, this proposal of Schröder's was challenged by the French Prime

Minister Lionel Jospin in May, 2001. Jospin espoused a different vision of the EU's constitutional future, though for some part based on a 'federation of nation states' as Fischer had acknowledged (Jones, 2001, p.46). Jospin stated that the EU should aim at a confederation rather than a federation. Thus, the disharmony among the major countries began to disturb the political integration.

3. The current issues in the EU

Let us now shift the emphasis away from the history of the integration to the current issues which have been discussed in the EU.

3-1. The 'democratic deficit' in the EU

As the integration has progressed, the Union has gained more power and decision-making authority. This process will surely go further, whichever model (i.e., federal or confederal) it may follow. Ideally, the decision-making in the EU should be done democratically. However, the present institutional organization falls short of ensuring democracy in the process; in other words, the democratic mechanism of the Union is deficient. This issue has come to be known as 'democratic deficit' and is one of the weaknesses of the EU. There is a growing dissatisfaction among citizens about the process of policy making which is remote from the lives of citizens. Transferal of authority has occurred in policy areas such as currency, foreign policy, security, and defence. Since these areas are generally regarded

as core aspects of national sovereignty and identity, the integration has provoked strong reactions among European citizens. At the same time, it is doubtful that the citizens of European nations will assent to the further transfer of national sovereignty and substantial decision-making authority to EU institutions without democratic accountability. Until now democratic accountability and legitimacy have been the exclusive properties of nation states (Baun, 1996, pp145-147).

Dinan states that the ‘democratic deficit’ always existed in the EU but it has become increasingly prominent since SEA in the mid-1980s (Dinan, 1999, p.295). Therefore, let us consider the concrete contents of the ‘democratic deficit’ under the following topics: weakness of the power of the European Parliament (EP), lack of transparency of the decision-making process, and disparity of the weighting of votes in the Council.

The first cause of the ‘democratic deficit’ is the weak power of the European Parliament. In other words, the ‘democratic deficit’ can in a way be conceived as the gap between the powers of national parliaments and the EP (Dinan, 1999, p.295). Despite the democratic legitimacy deriving from the fact that members of the European Parliament (EP) have been directly and democratically elected by the citizens of each nation state, the EP was given little power as a decision-making institution. Peterson mentions the difficulty of democratization of the EU because it is characterized by a distinctive type of multi-level

bargaining involving regional, national, and Union governments (Peterson, 1996, p.96). It is necessary to mix public representation and involvement at the regional, national, and European levels, involving parliamentary bodies from all three spheres in order to solve the issue of the ‘democratic deficit’. Calingaert suggest that the main solution to the ‘democratic deficit’ is an increase in the powers of the Parliament (Calingaert, 1996, p.105). The reform of the EP is seen as a way to strengthen the role of the national parliament in the EU decision-making process. Federalists, of course, want a much stronger role for the EP.

Secondly, transparency is lacking in the decision-making processes in the EU. Baun describes the ‘democratic deficit’ as ‘the limited accountability of EU decision-making institutions to democratically elected representative assemblies and the lack of transparency and openness in EU decision-making’ (Baun, 1996, p.145). Furthermore, Noble views the cause of the ‘democratic deficit’ as the strong directive power of the Council, whose decision-making process is closed to outside observers (Noble, 1995, p.69). The need for greater transparency was one of the important themes in the 1991 Maastricht Treaty. Transparency of the decision-making process, to use Bainbridge’s phrase, ‘strengthens the democratic nature of the institutions and the public’s confidence in the administration’ (Bainbridge, 2000, p.507).

A referendum in Denmark in 1992 is a good example to illustrate the lack of transparency.

The Danish people voted against the Maastricht Treaty, which the Danish Parliament had approved. What the ‘No’ vote made clear is that there was anxiety among citizens that the interests of a nation state might fall victim to the interests of the community and people’s lives would be threatened by integration. They felt that decision-making was done not by their government, but by a bureaucracy in Brussels. They were also becoming increasingly uneasy about EC bureaucratization and the centralization of political power in Brussels, and the public demanded more openness in the decision-making procedures. The Danish referendum later had a great impact on the process of the European integration and made people recognize the importance of transparency.

The third problem is the disparity of the weighting of votes in the Council, the disparity in the number of voters per representation. Each country (member state) has a certain number of votes, roughly depending on the size of the country and population. But some larger EU member countries argue that there is a distorted relation between the number of votes that each nation has in the Council and the size of the population represented by it.. Those countries demanded that this distortion should be corrected; however, this is strongly opposed by smaller member states, as the correction would inevitably lead to larger members having more influence in the Council..

The system of weighting was originally designed to favour the smaller states, because the smaller states needed some safeguards against the larger ones. This discord about the voting

system between the larger and the smaller states has created an ongoing confrontation.

There have also been disputes in this regard between larger members. A conflict between Germany and France, concerning the voting system, arose at the Council meeting in Nice held in December, 2000, one of whose central agendas was institutional reform to prepare for eastern enlargement. Germany demands that the number of votes be directly correlated with its population, while France insisted on having the same number of votes as Germany, which has a significantly larger population

So far, we have seen the issues of the ‘democratic deficit’, the weaknesses in power of the European Parliament, the need for greater transparency, and the weighting of votes in the Council. It could be said that a lack of ‘democracy’ leads to the weaknesses of the EU. Now let’s turn to the strengths and goals of the EU itself.

3-2. The strengths and ultimate goal of European Union

Originally, for Monnet and Schuman, the aim of economic integration was the way to avert future European wars (Walker, 1994, p.351). In this, the Community can be said to have been successful. Also, Europe has achieved the Common Market and a single currency, though with a limited scope. The integration has made it possible for national governments to coordinate their policies to cope with such overarching issues as environmental problems. However, these strengths are still unstable, as members can opt out of a scheme which it

chooses not to be a part of. In order to perpetuate and further strengthen these successes, all the member states will have to be bound together, leaving no room for opting out. If not, the danger of disintegration, with potentially disastrous consequences, will always haunt Europe. This kind of firm integration can only be achieved with federal polity, however, difficult it may be to attain. Thus, as Siedentop states, ‘Federalism is the right goal for Europe’ (Siedentop, 2000, p.231), even only as a remote ideal.

3-3. The EU has not reached the goal of federalism

While the EU has several federal characteristics, including a Union title, some supranational institutions and a widening range of common policies, Jones points out several major differences between the Union and a ‘typical’ federation. Firstly, the EU does not have a written constitution and is based upon treaties negotiated by governments. Secondly, the power exercised by member states in EU decision-making has no parallel in any existing federation (Jones, 2001, p.41). Siedentop points out that each nation state is a sovereign nation. Furthermore, he emphasizes the difficulty of each country transferring its sovereignty to the EU. Siedentop states that the conditions, such as the local autonomy, a common language, the relative liquidity of social class, are lacking in Europe.

This leads us to review Siedentop’s statement that ‘Europe is not ready for federalism’ (Siedentop, 2000, p.231) and to clarify what countermeasures were taken in order to

overcome the ‘democratic deficit’ in the history of European integration. The reform of the EU has been performed with the aim of dissolving of the ‘democratic deficit’. This is particularly because the European Parliament is the only organization in which the members of an assembly are directly and democratically elected by the citizens of the Union. The Maastricht Treaty was an endeavor to create a ‘Political Union’, with a Common Foreign and Security Policy and a Common Currency. The ratification of Maastricht Treaty can be considered to be a shift from a confederation to a federation. The historical truth that the EU established the European Parliament and institutionalized the direct election of representatives can be interpreted as preparation for a shift to a federation. It is clear that this goal was a kind of unified European Federal State.

However, it should also be added that the interest in the Union and the sense of reliability of it among European people is still low because democratic procedures do not accompany the process of the EU integration. The processes of integration are continuing despite the relative lack of a Europe-wide allegiance. The EU therefore has to emphasise the identities of a ‘European citizen’. However, since there is little awareness of being a ‘European’ among citizens now, it seems preposterous that the people of Europe can have a common European identity. The problems of identity as a ‘European citizen’ and the ‘democratic deficit’ have not yet been resolved.

So far, we have seen some obstacles to the goal of federalism such as the ‘democratic deficit’, the entanglement of national interests among major countries in taking the initiative of integration, on the opposing ideas of confederalism and federalism. We can interpret that the lack of ‘democracy’ has relevance to the weaknesses of the EU. Siedentop states, ‘even if federalism is the proper goal for Europe, such a goal must be pushed well into the future—for the immediate need is to firm up or create democratic political cultures within member states as a preliminary to creating such a culture on a Europe-wide basis’ (Siedentop, 2000, p.1). Siedentop believes that Europe may be creating a new political form ‘something more than a confederation but less than a federation’ as one of the choices of the new political system of Europe (Siedentop, 2000, p.1). Although Europe has been brewing the idea of federalism, it is still unable to realize Schuman's proposal of the federal integration. Thus, Europe is not ready for federalism.

4. Conclusion

A central feature of the EU’s development is that France and Germany have sometimes worked closely together (Calingaert, 1996, p.106). The two have taken the lead in making the decisions in the history of European integration. In spite of difficulties, the continuation of the Franco-German partnership was never threatened because both governments gave the highest priority to maintaining the alliance. However, it takes time for European people to understand that ‘federalism’ is superior to the ‘*a Europe des patries*’.

After posing the question, ‘*Quo vadis Europa?*’ in Berlin, Fischer goes on to answer it as follows: ‘onwards to the completion of European integration’. However, Fischer’s vision for the future of the EU is not easy to achieve. The problems which should be solved are still left behind to the dissolution of the ‘democratic deficit’. His vision of a federal Europe consisting of a directly elected president, and creating an European citizen seems to be somewhat unrealistic, because Europe is full of different peoples, cultures, languages and histories. Also, Siedentop argues that each European nation state has a different type of political culture (Siedentop, 2000, pp.102-103). Since the EU does not have a common political culture and an EU Constitution, it cannot have a functioning democracy. A political integration endeavour should be taking into consideration the historical and cultural environments in Europe. There is consequently no basis for an EU Federal State that is stable and democratic. More democratic elements are required in Europe which would strengthen the relations of interdependent states by accepting the existence of various cultures in Europe to reach the goal of a true EU.

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