

Nationalism is a virus, federalism the cure

FT, John Thornhill, 21 January 2013

Two politicians make a powerful case that the European project suffers not from too much ambition but too little, writes John Thornhill.

One interpretation of the eurozone crisis says that it resulted from the hubristic ambition of Europe's political elite, whose theoretical abstractions outstripped all practical and democratic considerations. It must therefore be time to slam integration into reverse.

This powerful book, written by two experts on the EU, makes the opposite case: the eurozone is failing because the bloc's leaders have not been ambitious enough. What is needed to salvage the project is yet another institutional redesign, a democratic revolution, and a bold leap forward into the future.

Writing in a personal capacity, Sylvie Goulard, a French MEP, and Mario Monti, Italy's prime minister, accept that the EU as currently constituted suffers from many defects. It is, as its critics argue, too technocratic and not sufficiently democratic; it decides too late and achieves too little.

But the authors reject the counter-argument that all political virtue resides with the nation-state. Indeed, their book is a spirited assault on the very sustainability of the European nation-state, which they view as only a passing phenomenon in the onward march of human progress.

European nations, they argue, are modern - and mostly artificial - constructions, in whose name millions have been murdered. If they had not already been created, they would not be invented today: they are unsuited to our era. Nationalism is a "virus" that needs to be contained rather than celebrated.

The world's great challenges - financial stabilisation, climate change, immigration and security - can be successfully tackled only at the multilateral level. The genius of the EU, which defends the rights and shared values of 500m people, is that it can focus on the next generation rather than the next election. If the boldest experiment in international institution building crumbles, it will spell a bleak future for the world.

"Europeans of today, the spoiled children of peace, tend to forget the ravages of nationalism about which François Mitterrand . . . invited us to remember with his shock formula: 'Nationalism is war.' "

The title of their book consciously echoes Alexis de Tocqueville's masterpiece on the democratic development of the US. Much of their inspiration is drawn from the Federalist Papers, which argued the case for the creation of a federal state in the US in the late 18th century.

The authors contend that the mutualisation of the states' debts at that time was a vital step in the evolution of the US. Federal institution-building stemmed from the political responsibilities that were assumed in the process of economic integration. So it will prove with the eurozone. A political union will in time be reverse-engineered out of economic and monetary union.

Lest anyone shudder at the thought that this process might be undemocratic, the authors argue for a simultaneous political revolution in the eurozone to instil greater institutional accountability.

There is such a thing as the European demos, they insist, and the European parliament must be the forum in which its views are expressed. Europe's voters should be allowed to vote for pan-European parties, rather than voting for MEPs in national elections. Political vice and virtue, as they put it, is not dependent on a passport.

Armed with real powers to initiate legislation and raise taxes, the parliament would emerge as the democratic counterpoint to a federal state. The current European Council, which comprises the heads of state or government of the EU's 27 members, acts as a "cartel of nationalisms". Europeans must pioneer a new form of representative democracy that spans old borders.

Such visionary arguments will doubtless strike Britain's hardcore eurosceptics as mad and send them screaming for the EU exit. Even David Cameron, the British prime minister, who says that he wants the country to remain in the EU - albeit with a semi-detached status - would find almost nothing in common with this overarching vision for the continent's future.

But the authors' arguments apply most to the inner core of the eurozone rather than outer fringes of the EU. The validity of their views may soon be tested in Italy, where Monti has entered the political fray in an attempt to win electoral support for his renewed premiership. Can Italy's technocratic prime minister help to reinvent democracy in Europe - in one of its nation-states?