We are the League

Unlike the joyous celebrations that accompany Independence Day in the USA, the Chinese New Year or Australia Day, Europe Day is unlikely to be marked by exuberant street parades, sumptuous picnics or spectacular fireworks displays. In fact, few Europeans will even be aware that 9 May celebrates the anniversary of Robert Schumann's proposal for a unified Europe. Within the EU's member states, national celebrations such as Bastille Day still attract far more solemnity, military bombast and public gaiety, for it is undeniable that the European project is miserably unloved by the vast majority of its citizens.

As scientists we are accustomed to the concept that our colleagues in other countries—even on other continents—are esteemed and valued partners in the quest for knowledge. Nevertheless, most of us tend to regard the inducements to collaboration offered by Brussels with something between scorn and bitter indignation. We simply do not like being marshalled into doing the things that we love doing anyway; and we rightly value a principled argument more highly than a concerted action.

The risible reputation of EU science funding among most serious scientists reflects a more general cynicism about the ways and means of Brussels and Strasbourg. This is typified by our scandalously peripatetic parliament and the consequent waste of taxpayer money. While we might be grudgingly happy that a new bridge or by-pass is built with an EU subsidy, most of us wonder indignantly how food prices can be so high despite the over-expenditure on European agriculture, which still dwarfs EU support for science by an astonishing ratio of more than ten to one.

In all of this, we have lost sight of the original goals of the European project—perhaps because they have never been properly explained to us. Those born after 1945 have been inculcated from a young

age with the idea that history began with the heroic defeat of Nazi barbarity; those born after 1989 measure the dawn of civilization from the downfall of Communism. Few of us carry more than a distant folk memory of the foolish hatred and vanity that drove millions to slaughter each other in the World Wars. But the European project really owes its existence to those who guided us through those terrible times and understood that it must never be allowed to happen again.

For the plain fact is that it did happen again. The peace treaties of 1919 and the international bodies that they spawned simply fell apart under the pressure of economic upheaval. The failure of the League of Nations has been attributed to many causes, but one obvious defect was the fact that it created no structures to bind together the economic interests of its members. The Atlantic Charter, and the founding treaties of what became the EU, sought to rectify that. After the internationalization of heavy industry came the introduction of the single market, monetary union and, finally, massive investment to assist the new Eastern members recovering from the blight of dictatorship.

The whole project, nevertheless, was conceived and implemented during the good times. As darker clouds gather, threatening economic dislocation on a similar scale to the 1930s, we see worrying signs that the whole European edifice is built of flimsy stuff. Nations scramble for advantage or quickly resort to protectionism, while professing to be doing the very opposite. European-wide institutions and mechanisms designed to prevent the resurgence of economic nationalism are under threat. The constitutional requirement for wide consensus and even unanimity, as well as the absence of credible enforcement mechanisms, could spell doom for the whole enterprise; these structural defects are the very ones that emasculated the League of Nations.

All of this might sound preposterously alarmist, but we should remember that, less than a decade before 1914, the citizens of virtually all nations considered a major war unthinkable in such a civilized era. Even the arrival of a progressive internationalist in the White House offers little comfort: the last two progressive internationalists to occupy the premises were Woodrow Wilson from 1913 to 1921 and Franklin Delano Roosevelt from 1933 to 1945.

During the Cold War, it was scientists, from Albert Einstein through to Andrei Sakharov, who alerted the world to the horrifying dangers of nuclear war. Their campaigns had a profound influence on public opinion, eventually nudging the superpowers into the grudging compromise of *Détente*, despite the proxy wars that continued to be waged. Two decades ago it was again scientists who first raised the alarm over global climate change. We have no less a duty to resist the rise of xenophobia today, and government policies that pander to it. But fighting this battle in 27 different states is not enough. We also need to argue for a real European constitution: one that re-asserts the EU's founding principles in words that every citizen can understand and has a chance to ratify; one that defines workable and democratic mechanisms to achieve those goals; one that agrees on enforceable rules; and one that also affirms the global dimension of the European project. The current alternative, an ever-closer union that appears as a fig leaf for an increasingly incomprehensible bureaucracy, will not last, and the possible backlash against it could have ghastly consequences.

When an experiment gives an intriguing result we are obliged to repeat it; however, when the topic of the experiment is history and the result is war, repeating the experiment is not the wisest course of action.

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