

Ideals and Identities: what Europe needs to make Europeans

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With Tony Blair in Brussels arguing that to save our ideals we must adapt them, what are the prospects for Europe to find principles common to all 450 million European citizens? The differences between the values of the Spanish and the Slovenians could be considered as stark as between the English and French. This is not to say we have nothing in common, but that our ideals form part of our identity. The results from the recent referendums in France and Holland have made it clear that there is currently no agreed vision of what it is to be 'European'. Yet there do exist fundamental ideals that we can all support, shedding hope on the future of a European identity.

Successive Home Secretaries have found it difficult to define or encourage the notion of 'British-ness', even three hundred years after the Union of 1707, when the idea of a 'Briton' re-emerged. The centuries-long identities of the English, Scots, Irish and Welsh have been forged from culture, language, history and conflict. The question now seems to be whether or not we can tack on another layer of identity that lacks these bonding factors.

Our neighbours seem to be adopting the labels of 'Europeo' in Spain, 'Evropaioi' in Greece and even 'Europejczyk' in Poland; so can we do the same here? Anecdotal evidence suggests that Britons shy away from this new identity almost with the same fervour that many new Europeans embrace it.

Old jokes about the Irish, or the Poles and Belgians for that matter, arouse strong feelings of identity that are based on emotions noticeably lacking with regards to 'European-ness'. While we all relate to many layers of identity, such as family, community, and nation, we rarely associate ourselves with something grander: the EU. This is one of the Union's singular deficiencies: its citizens lack the necessary identity to support it.

No single culture over-arches the Continent that Europeans can recognise; attempts to create a single European language have failed; the history of the EU only goes back fifty years; and, conflicts, such as Iraq, have only served to divide us.

War, however, formed the original impetus. The idea to bind sovereign nations together tarnished the allure of unilateralism, and as such, dissolved the instability inherent between independent states. The prevention of a third world war on the continent has in large part been due to the integration of persistently warring nations.

Unfortunately, peace and security, as Dutch MP Lousewies van der Laan noted at a recent Foreign Policy Centre seminar on Europe, do not resonate with the majority of European citizens. The greatest complaints by the French and Dutch over the Constitution were largely economic and little to do with the idea of the document itself.

The British vision of Europe is also largely one of economics. Obviously there are those, like Giscard D'Estaing, who see the 'EU Project' as something greater, who believe it should encapsulate something more than just the economy; and perhaps one day it will. At the moment, though, it remains an 'Economic Project'. This, unfortunately for the advocates of the flagging European Constitution, is

what the EU is largely judged on, daily, by its citizens. The economy, however, rarely stirs the soul.

Boring legislation, stories of inefficiency, technocrats and 'gravy trains', are the few impressions of the EU people have. National leaders blaming Brussels to save their own skin from voter discontent have made it even harder to be proud of being European.

The Constitution could have provided an inspirational first step toward the goal of a more organic European identity. Nick Clegg MP, speaking after Ms. Van der Laan, said that the Constitution was not 'a Bible, or a tablet of stone' that we could all rally around. The 200 pages of numbing content made it difficult for the majority of people to understand it let alone attach themselves to it.

Ideally, the Constitution should have brought together the principles and beliefs that we all hold dear; the lofty values that in our hearts we know are the base for peace and prosperity. The Constitution would have then established the axiomatic ideals that do exist between the nations of Europe.

Creating a document worthy of the disparate peoples of the EU to unite around should have been the first priority of those who wrote the Constitution. This would have laid solid foundations for the building of an embraceable European identity.

Benedict Anderson believed that national identity is a sense of an 'imagined community'. If European leaders want their voters in the end to support a more constitutionalised Europe, they have to be able to solve one basic contradiction. How are we to vote for an EU Constitution that is supposed to create a European identity until we imagine ourselves as English, British *and* European?