

Danuta Hübner
Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament

***Challenges and opportunities towards a federal Europe
The role of the European Parliament***

*European Federalists Summer Reception
2 September 2014, Brussels*

I hope you will forgive me if I start with a few words on the recent decision of the member states to elect the Polish Prime Minister the president of the European Council. I belong to those who find it a wise choice.

Europe is sailing through troubled waters today.

We live in times when a lot of nationalism, populism, even racism can be found across Europe. We see leaders whose capacities to adapt to common rules and values have faltered over the last years.

But there are also risks to European unity coming from the outside, even from its closest neighbourhood. After decades of efforts aimed at building a partnership and cooperation with Russia, we seem to be back to geopolitics and the old style global powers competition.

After decades of openness towards new membership, we seem to care much less about strength offered by enlargements.

To have a committed European, a representative of a nation that had been striving for decades to build a common destiny with its European family, as the Council president, is certainly reassuring.

Mr Tusk's appointment will keep Poles in the mainstream of European integration in these difficult times, when winds blow in different directions. I think it can help keep the whole of Central and Eastern Europe in the mainstream of deeper integration.

His clear commitment to European foreign and security policy, to the energy union, to deeper eurozone integration, to the community method, is a chance for the EU to develop more federal attitudes in this time of growing pressures towards softening demands for federal solutions.

But it is also legitimate to ask whether this nomination can lead to a loosening of bonds linking Western Europe and the European project and alienating "old" EU members?

These bonds matter. Having them weakened would be a big mistake.

My second point is about unity, diversity and the federal ideal. The dilemma is linked to the sustainability of the way unity, diversity, the federal ideal and European integration emerged and evolved over decades, where unity has been built on the basis of one-size fits all philosophy. Today, the challenge is to adapt the system based on one-size and one-decision fits all to the demands of specificity and local differentiation. This reality brings risks to the famous "unity in diversity" principle. However, in order to allow for diversity to be fully exploited we in fact need to have in place genuine unity, one rooted in solid grounds. Federal solutions clearly offer such grounds.

Thinking federal can add to the unity and help with identifying the issues on which Europe should be big.

Over the last months, the buzzline seems to be "Europe big on big issues and small on small ones." There is a long list of politicians claiming copyrights for it. The challenge here is to agree on what the big issue are and clearly outline also those which from the European perspective belong to the family of smaller concerns.

Federalism is about organising a polity through the division of powers between orders of government. As such, it is understood sometimes differently by different people, either as the ideal of an ever closer political union or a fully-fledged European state or as a process of balancing power in a differentiated political order

that can offer a frame of reference for the different ways in which one may effectively govern Europe.

While in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the term hints at strong centralisation, the term in the continental European tradition refers more to a decentralised system. In the latter case, federalism has embedded within it the concept of subsidiarity.

Subsidiarity, if effectively done, may help guide the distribution of powers within a federation. It can allow us to make Europe small on small issues in a smart way.

This interdependence between unity and diversity seems to me fundamental. And it is compatible with a federal ideal.

My third point is about institutions and citizens of a federal Europe.

European federalism is not only about Europe sharing institutions, but also about European citizens sharing a common destiny.

That is why Europe needs a realistic image of federalism, one which can be pursued and have on board the wide majority of European citizens. This is a federalism which needs to be taken with a pinch of salt and along with a pragmatic approach to politics. Federalism should not hold promises of a perfect political system, but rather come with the duty to improve the future of the system.

This is a federal system built on institutional devices both protecting constituent units (subsidiarity) as well as mechanisms holding the federation together (the EU Treaty, and the European Court of Justice).

It is also a federal system in which laws are legitimized through the decisions made by the legislative institutions of the Union and the interests of the Union voiced by its own institutions. It is a system in which a good balance between integration/unity and differentiation/diversity prevails.

But, and this is my final point, federalism is not about a cast in stone institutional architecture, it is about the state of mind and commitment of leaders. Like Jean

Quatremer, I trust all new leaders are federalists. It is about the pragmatism of decision making.

Changes in leadership make sense only if the new leaders are better than the previous ones, the EU cannot afford to deliver a worse leadership. Without any doubt, this is profoundly important now when we do not have easy years ahead of us. There is no need to explain why. The reasons vary from the economic situation and systemic weaknesses of it, to budgetary challenges, to external pressures, the need of treaty change and re-winning European citizens.

There are many consequences of the past of both avoidable as well as inevitable mistakes, which are still to come.

Mountains of debt, confronted with demography will have to be handled. The choice between eurobonds and public investment is still to be made. A lot of difficult decisions will be needed every day.

A sustainable political future of Europe will not just happen, it will have to be meticulously constructed.

And changing the Union will have to be rooted in democracy. This is not only about a national type of democracy, we must ultimately also consider the transitional dimension of it.

Here, the European Parliament plays a key role.

So, my last point is that Parliament has a pivotal responsibility in constructing of a federal Europe.

Firstly, the EP should engage in ensuring a better use of the principle of subsidiarity. But there is a risk here, the big issues are by definition less important for citizens. By focusing exclusively on them, we face the risk of deepening the wedge between Europe and European citizens.

Secondly, the EP can play its role in not allowing the fragmentation of the Union. This is particularly justified in virtue of the fact that the Parliament is representative of the Union's citizens.

Thirdly, the EP should take a lead in the discussion to better exploit our current Treaty and in a future Treaty change.

We must remember that there is no untouchable core of primary Union Law and thus no unchangeable "Union identity" that couldn't advance towards a real federation of nation states.

The EP has at its disposal all instruments to push towards solutions that would give us a sustainable genuine unity.

It is not going to be easy for it to have its voice heard, but we must make it.