

The Royal Society of Edinburgh

Thursday 8 May 2008

The European Lecture

Sir John Grant, KCMG

Former UK Permanent Representative (Ambassador) to the EU

The EU: does it have a future?

Don't blame the fault lines

The "fault lines" which divide the UK from the rest of Europe are more than geological, but the EU is our best bet for the future, despite all its flaws, according to Britain's former ambassador to the EU, Sir John Grant. In a world which will be dominated by regional superpowers, the EU will not only give us a stronger and more influential voice but also provide the global leadership needed to establish common principles and values, and promote effective action to deal with the major challenges of globalisation...

"The EU – what is it good for?" was the main theme of Sir John Grant's recent RSE lecture. As well as focusing on Europe's past achievements and future potential, he also discussed what was *bad* about the EU, and the "grumpy acquiescence interspersed with bitter controversy" of the UK's relations with Brussels, over the last ten years.

Sir John's core argument was that the maintenance of international peace and stability in the 21st century will depend on a system of global governance and collective action. There will have to be a new balance of power that takes account of the growing influence of the emerging economies. The EU has the potential weight and influence in the world to play a decisive role in that process, while the medium-sized economies of Europe (including the UK) do not. And because of the EU's position in the world, the way it represents a set of values and its leadership in areas such as climate change can play a positive part in this process.

The UK's uncomfortable relationship with the EU

Even though it is not uniform throughout the country, the UK often feels uncomfortable about Europe, across the political spectrum. There is a general perception that the EU is "a place where people muddle and compromise in order to reach unsatisfactory conclusions." And perhaps this has something to do with the fact that the UK was reluctant to join in the first place, and therefore played no part in shaping its early development.

Weak leadership and fears about a European superstate are among the most common complaints. "One sound you never hear in Brussels is the smack of firm government," Sir John said. On the contrary, he added, there is an exhaustive process designed to reflect the interests of all the participants, including minority voices, as a result of which negotiations often get bogged down in "waffle" and finish with "fudge."

The UK is often depicted as battling against all the odds to defend itself from Brussels, and while this is exaggerated by the media and exploited by politicians, these negative attitudes do have roots in reality – in what Sir John described as the "fault lines" which divide us from Europe. Our position in Europe has to be understood, said Sir John, because our long-term future will depend on the success (or failure) of the EU and its place in a fast-changing, potentially unstable world.

What are the fault lines?

Unlike the UK, most EU member states have not had a history of stable, democratic, long-established political institutions, for instance because of the traumas of Nazi and Communist rule. It has been easier for those countries to allow the transfer of power to the supranational institutions of Brussels. In addition, the UK is an island, with a particularly close relationship with the United States. Our legal system, based on common law rather than the Napoleonic Code, also sets us apart. We are determined to get the fine print right – while our European partners are often more relaxed about trusting the "spirit" of the law. We also have different employment laws, economic structures and agricultural traditions.

In Sir John's own experience, the UK's representatives also have tougher instructions to follow when it comes to talks in Brussels, and therefore less room to manoeuvre.

But there is also room for optimism, according to Sir John, not just in the UK's improving relations with Europe and our growing influence on policy, but also in the way the EU learns from its experience, developing a set of common values which will have an impact on the rest of the world.

Is the EU fit for purpose?

Many people say the EU is "a good idea in principle, but a bad one in practice." Sir John conceded that EU processes were "complex, chronically inefficient, and prone to fudge, muddle and compromise," and described the decision-making process of the EU as "like operating a three-dimensional coalition government." But there are reasons for that, he explained.

The EU is designed by a series of treaties which not only reflect the divergent views and interests of all of its members, but also provide the checks and balances needed to protect smaller nations from big ones. Minorities, pressure groups, NGOs and individuals cannot be easily bullied, and power blocs cannot dictate the agenda.

Sir John believes the EU could be much more efficient, but the price would be the creation of a superstate. More constitutional reform is not what's needed at the moment, he added. The challenge is not how to change the EU but to make it work better.

The EU has much to be proud of. It is the world's largest single market, with a strong and stable currency, and a leader in environmental policy. It is a global regulator and setter of standards. It has a key peacekeeping role and is also a trailblazer in supranational cooperation. The EU has always had vision, but rather than focus on what it has done in the past, Sir John sees it having a much bigger role in the future, far beyond Europe itself, offering leadership not just on issues of principle but also in practical action.

Europe – what is it good for?

In Sir John's view, the major problems facing the world are sustainability, globalisation and climate change, terrorism, regional conflicts, and shortages of energy, water and food. There is also a crisis of values, while "the emergence of new forms of capitalism do not sit comfortably with our own," said Sir John.

The challenge for the EU is to help the world establish mutual values and work much more closely together. We can no longer rest our hopes on a benevolent "world policeman" like the US, and we long ago rejected the imperial model. The balance of power will be decided by regional superpowers, and Europe has a key role to play.

Sir John said: "The EU offers leadership to the world not only on issues of principle, but also in the thornier area of application and implementation." And the UK will do better as part of an EU-led "superpower" than a small (and getting relatively smaller) nation state.

In response to a question from the farming community, criticising the "dead hand" of the EU, Sir John agreed that UK farmers were often critical of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and agreed that it was desirable to reform it further. But, he suggested, the EU was more than just the CAP.

Sir John concluded by saying that despite its imperfections, the EU was our best hope for the future. "It may look muddled," he explained, "but the alternative is worse."

– **Peter Barr**