



**one world trust**

# FEDERALISM: A TESTIMONY

**BY JOHN ROBERTS**

*Federalism: A Testimony is the fourth in the One World Trust pamphlet series entitled Global Responsibility – Reaching Beyond National Sovereignty. This series examines the relevance of federalist ideas to the globalisation debate.*

## INTRODUCTION

Professor John Roberts, veteran world citizen, has been a Trustee of the One World Trust for many years, and was formerly Chairman of the Trust. In this essay, his swansong before retiring from the Trust, he sets out the Federalist vision which has long been the major component of the Trust's thinking, and he demonstrates its relevance to the world today.

Sixty years ago, when the Trust was established in the aftermath of world war, many Federalists urged a world federal constitution. Today such dreams are not in fashion, yet the need for effective and democratic world institutions is more urgent than ever, and is acknowledged by many in the burgeoning global justice movement. Half a century ago, there was heated debate among Federalists (and indeed between Roosevelt and Churchill) as to the priority between a united Europe and a united world. Today the tentatively federal experiment of the European Union (EU) begins to emerge as the key protagonist for the global rule of law.

In the British context this explanatory essay is helpful because Federalism is often a presence which dares not speak its name. India, Canada, and Australia were able to find an identity as nations because the local regions discovered the benefits of combining to delegate some of their powers to a federal government. Conversely, Scotland and Wales have learned that it is possible for local issues to be decided locally, without weakening the national government. Federalism has reconciled many conflicting aspirations. Yet when the British debate the future of Europe, "federalism" has become a term of abuse, and the Government denies that it cherishes a federalist dream, as though that would be a cause for shame. In what was formerly our monolithic state, the idea of dispersing democratic government to the appropriate level is not easily grasped. Meanwhile some Federalists on the Continent, whose thinking was inspired by the British Federalists of the 1930s and 1940s, would have attacked the proposed Constitution because it is not federalist enough. There will be few voices offering voters a dispassionate picture of that innovative animal, the European Union, with its federal parliament and its distinctly unfederal foreign and defence policies. In Iraq, some form of federal government seems an indispensable basis for a democratic state, while some looser form of regional federation may prove one day the only way to bring lasting peace and democratic stability to the Middle East as a whole. In Africa, the Governments of states whose former colonial frontiers bear no relation to tribal, ethnic or religious communities are beginning to contemplate an African Union. Federalism has become an essential part of modern statecraft, as a means of reconciling local interests with the continental and global order.

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Certainly at the global level, the unification of capital markets, global media and communications, and the mounting challenges of war, terrorism, poverty, and a collapsing environment have outpaced the capacity of fragile global institutions. Clearly, intergovernmental muddling through is not enough. The new imperialism recently in fashion visibly creates more problems than it solves. If citizens are to exercise democratic control of the institutions which influence so many aspects of their lives, there is need for new thinking.

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Democratic Federalism, as John Roberts points out, honours the sovereignty of the citizen, while seeking to delegate the powers of government to whatever level is appropriate, whether local, regional, national, continental or global. In this way it seeks to combine diversity with effective action in response to common needs. There may be no sudden leap to world constitution, what matters is that, as in the European Union, successive steps and institutions established to solve common global problems should embody the core qualities of effectiveness, democracy and the rule of law.

This essay is rich in historical examples, including rich ironies as the hostility of the world's most powerful federation, the United States, to any hint of Federalism in the world at large. Moving from present hegemonies to a just and democratic global partnership will require a change not only of minds, but of hearts.

Lord Archer of Sandwell, QC  
President, Board of Trustees  
One World Trust

## **I. THE ONE WORLD TRUST AND ITS MISSION**

### **WHY FEDERALISM IS A CHIEF PART OF THE TRUST'S EFFORTS**

The One World Trust has always had as its chief aim the simple but profound need for world unity. The logic of pursuing this need has led to federal solutions, for reasons that follow from the nature of the unity in diversity that we seek.

As a political mechanism-cum-philosophy federalism arose, Phoenix-like, from the fire of the American Revolution and its untidy aftermath. Its proponents drew more from their own reading of history and the thinking of Europeans such as Locke and Montesquieu as from any schemes proffered or tried in the past. But the "Great Rehearsal" for the forging of a world federal government, as the making of the American constitution has been termed, has turned sour. The greatest political success of any historically recorded time, the federal constitution of the U.S.A., designed to turn thirteen fractious colonial states into a balanced and freedom-loving union that could offer an example to a warring world and lead it to peace, has nurtured a nationalism which, by reaction, now leads the world down the old road to hostility and war. Federalism, like other political ideologies and religions, has been ensnared by nationalism and can only be restored by association with a universalist theme.

### **HUMAN UNITY**

Unity? In a physical sense this has been a fact that became obvious as soon as men could circumnavigate the globe. The progress of science since that time has come, increasingly, to assert the physical interdependence of the whole of planet earth – the atmosphere, the oceans, the water cycle, climate and the whole biosphere with its multitude of elements and species. The sense of oneness acknowledged by the culture and religions of native peoples has

been given intellectual form by western thought. Global unity is inescapable and has always been. The questions that arise relate specifically to humanity. Biological unity, despite racist theories, is an inescapable reality. All humans living today come from one species, that is to say that they interbreed without difficulty and blend imperceptibly with the natural world. The superficiality of our diversities can be seen in the remarkably small percentage of genetic difference between, not only all humans, but between us and other primates. Human divergence can best be ascribed not to biology but to quite other causes.

## **ECONOMICS AND SCIENCE**

Economically our world has been knitted together by the progress of trade and commerce since the 18th century. With the establishment of colonial empires, developed to satisfy European consumer desires and the search for wealth, came a series of trades that depended upon incessant travel and labour to keep distant countries not merely in touch but also more and more closely bound up with each other. Western scientific knowledge progressed through the widening circles of discovery and interchange of ideas. From Europe, with the gathering-in of more and more data about the physical world and its constituents, scientists developed co-operation that was aimed to be universal. From tentative beginnings in the early 17th Century, a web of knowledge and intellectual contacts spread across Europe and into the New World, followed by extension to the whole of humankind. Scientific unity, though impeded and distorted by secrecy that stems from military and commercial rivalry, is largely accepted and effective.

## **TECHNOLOGY**

Technical and technological unity have developed in parallel. The modern ships of the 18th Century that began to take cargoes to and from Europe to the Indies, Africa and America were not themselves copied beyond the home continent for many years, but by a hundred years later the railways were beginning to link the countries of the world. And they were supplemented by the telegraph, consigning distance to the past. By 1900 the advent of radio had almost completed the network and it was far easier for a politician to hear from and communicate with all parts of the world than it had been for the Roman emperors to order their subjects at the ends of empire.

## **CULTURE**

Cultural unity is not universal, but in parts it exists already. Western classical music has devotees in every country and the 20th Century saw the conquest of popular music in a series of progressions. Jazz, with its roots in African-Americans, and a host of other sounds flashed across the world by the new technologies of radio, recording, television, have been winning new audiences in every society throughout the past century or more. "World Music" feeds the creative sounds of all the continents into this common culture. Above all, it is the way to the hearts of the young, who are swayed in huge measure by their taste for fashionable song, music and the culture of their peers.

## **ORGANISATIONAL UNITY**

The first international organisations, apart from the great religions – notably the long-lived Catholic Church – began to be formed at the start of the 19th century. With the growth of trade and communication links, they became common by the end of that era. The 20th century saw an enormous growth and by 2000 there were reckoned to be 300 Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs), 60,000 Transnational Corporations (TNCs) and 40,000 international Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) knitting the world together in so many

different ways that it is now impossible to act unilaterally in any important affair without affecting the interests of the whole human community.

### **POLITICAL UNITY**

But all these evidences of unity lack one crucial element. Political unity, like spiritual unity, despite many efforts and some signs of success, eludes the human race. We profess peace and amity but are steeped in international violence and periodic wars. So the task of the One World Trust, in its work for human unity, is above all to promote a healthy form of world political unity, a culture of world citizenship, and institutional structures and patterns of behaviour that enable the peoples of the world to transcend conflicts and work together to master common challenges.

### **GLOBALISATION**

The new dominating culture of the west, with its aggressive view that mankind's mission is to exploit nature and its resources, and maximise material wealth, has generated or exposed a widening range of global problems: environmental pollution, accelerating climate change, disappearing species, poverty and illiteracy, epidemic disease, exploding population – and there will be more. The difficulties in handling them are, above all, due to lack of a political unity which truly represents all the world's citizens – an acknowledgement of joint responsibility for the crises of the planet. With that gained, most of the challenges could be met or mitigated. Without it, many of the solutions are not even being started upon.

### **INTERGOVERNMENTALISM: THE GLOBAL TECHNOCRACY**

A multitude of global institutions have been brought into being to help deal with common problems. Some even influence events and exercise real power. But almost without exception these bodies, if effective, can be described as hegemonic. World economic policy is decided, not in the powerless Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, but in the G8 and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) dominated by the rich industrial countries. The IMF, through its powers as a lender, has dictated the social as well as economic policies of the poorest states. Indeed, compared with these bodies the maligned World Trade Organisation (WTO) has been a significant improvement; though the facts of power still count, in form at least all countries have a say. The Security Council, the most powerful arm of the United Nations, is dominated by its Permanent Members, an archaic oligarchy of the states most powerful in 1945. And almost all the key bodies – the IMF, the WTO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), even the Conference of the Parties to the UN's Convention on Climate Change have this in common: power and decision making are far removed from Parliaments and electorates, and exercised by Governments which often do little or nothing to inform or consult the democratic sources of their power. The lack of accountability has been challenged by civil society – the many non-governmental organisations which mobilise concerned citizens. But these too are unelected.

The one international body which is not hegemonic (though there are tensions between small and large states), which acknowledges its supranationality, and which has made a consistent effort to match its power with an elected democratic element, is the European Union. The irony is that, unlike the other hegemonic intergovernmental institutions, it is the most criticised for a so-called “democratic deficit”.

The truth is that the world's technocratic intergovernmental institutions are convenient for many Ministers and officials. Where effective they enhance

the trend in member countries to increase executive power at the expense of parliaments. Where ineffective, they leave problems unsolved, and fail to bind members to shared commitments.

## **EMPIRE OR PARTNERSHIP?**

In recent years the doctrine of a new liberal imperialism, or hegemony, has been unashamedly propounded and not only by Americans. Those who have most power, it is argued, must take responsibility for imposing solutions: by introducing democracy, by force if necessary, by making use of market mechanisms to transfer northern technology and mindsets to other poorer peoples, by continuing to enjoy the privileges of wealth while relying on the “trickling down” of wealth to lift up others to share some of their material well-being. In its belief that the West knows best this doctrine echoes both the power and missionary zeal of the Victorians.

## **FAILINGS OF HEGEMONY**

The trouble with this approach is that it offends both justice and realism. Today’s huge differences of wealth are unsustainable; yet if all the predicted ten billion citizens of the planet are to acquire material objects on the scale of the Americans the resources of many planets would be required. Problems like climate change cannot be mastered without the wholehearted cooperation of the whole human race. Just as biological diversity is essential for the survival of life on earth, so cultural diversity is a necessary source of creative enrichment and wellbeing for humanity. No empire is eternal, not even the American - and in the next half century the “West” faces a choice between bringing into being common global democratic institutions which can secure peace, or plunging into a new power struggle with new generations of weapons, between the United States, China and others.

Federalism seeks to give a form to unity which enables joint action, yet allows diversity, shares and limits central power, and honours a degree of equality between partner states. It seeks to democratise shared governance in a multipolar world.

## **II. WHAT IS FEDERALISM?**

### **LIMITATIONS ON AUTHORITY**

Federalism is at one and the same time a political philosophy and form of government. It involves an acceptance of the limitations that must be set upon the power of any political authority. No government is sovereign, because all have to accept limitations that curtail – rightly – their freedom of action. Only the individual citizen is ultimately sovereign in theory, albeit subject to natural law and the necessary constraints on unfettered freedom when growing up in society. Before that, of course, a child has rarely had much choice about the surrender of freedom to the adults who determine much of its life. Because a federal government has its powers deliberately limited, a true federation is a barrier against tyranny.

Federal governments have acted tyrannically when they have failed to uphold the principles upon which their power is based, and the principles have not been grounded in an effective rule of law.

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## **THE PITH OF FEDERALISM**

Federalism is a political system pivoted on the individual. He or she has the ultimate say, in parish, town, county, state, regional and continent-wide federal government. In turn, the individual is held responsible for personal actions, be they infringing a speed-limit, helping a company to break legal sanctions, or ordering the use of force to frustrate federal or other common decisions. If individuals have a right to vote, speak and organise politically, they have a duty to uphold the law and accept democratic decisions. If at fault, the individual and any accomplices should to be arraigned by law and tried fairly, not blockaded or bombed into submission.

Most federal systems have formal constitutions, with strict provisions about the division of authority and the powers allocated to different levels of government. But the spirit of compromise, of the acceptance of limitations, is even more necessary to the proper functioning of federalism than are their constitutional details, which themselves may sometimes be ignored or evaded. A unitary state government, such as that of the United Kingdom, may respect the traditional powers of the counties which constitute its secondary levels of government, even though no written constitution protects these from complete absorption by the central authority.

The fact that Kent, for example, which was a self-governing country in the seventh century, retained essentially its same boundaries for many local government purposes until very recently, indicates how the acceptance of limitations can facilitate the administration of even a state not avowedly federal.

## **GEOGRAPHICAL LIMITATIONS**

Federal Government is by consent. In no way should the government of the United Kingdom be permitted to determine the administration of, say, Iceland, nor even the closer Faroe Islands, since their inhabitants have no voice in the choosing of the UK government. Federalism implies the restriction of the area of government control to that in which the government is responsible to its own citizens, and is limited in its powers by their surveillance and ultimate sovereignty.

Thus the so-called Federation of Central Africa was never more than a sham, because the majority of the inhabitants of the area it governed were destitute of any means of control over their government. Insofar as a federation is undemocratic it ceases to be truly federal, because it denies one of the limitations which federalism requires, i.e. democratic control.

## **WORLD FEDERALISM**

Thus a world federal government would need, first, to be limited in the scope of its functions and the members will have to appreciate this without needing chapter and verse. National governments must continue to take the greatest responsibility for the supervision of the everyday lives of their societies and the world federal government will gain both respect and authority if it cultivates a policy of the least interference possible. Second in importance will be a written world constitution setting out the formal powers of government essential to keep the peace, to inspect and control the level of armaments, to implement crucial common environmental policies such as on climate change, to manage a sustainable world economy, to protect human rights and global justice. Finally, a world federal government will have to make itself responsive to the democratic wishes of the human family, or it will not endure. That is what federalism is about.

## EARLY DAYS

Since 1938 a group of dedicated people have been part of a political movement in Great Britain. This group came together under the threat of Hitler and the Nazi quest for power. They believed that only by combining against that threat could democratic societies hope to prevent defeat and absorption by totalitarian states. As a consequence, they named their movement the 'Federal Union'. With the coming of war – phoney war for much of Britain – they did not fade away. On the contrary, they flourished, reaching a peak of some 12,000 members in 1940. They had very widespread support – ambassadors like Lord Lothian were early supporters. Barbara Wootton, a notable social scientist, acted as Chairman for several years and Professor CEM Joad, a pacifist turned federalist who achieved widespread fame as one of the original BBC Brains Trust, was a leading speaker and publicist for the movement.

The movement attracted musicians, such as the composer Vaughan Williams and the conductor Sir Adrian Boult as well as the noted instrumentalists of the de Peyer family. It could call on the willing services of novelists such as Elizabeth Bowen and Olaf Stapleton. Academics, led by Sir William Beveridge and Professor Ivor Jennings, were among the keenest members. And the Federal Union organised the cooperation of little-known and distinguished figures among the European exiles in London. It was understanding of this federal spirit which inspired the war cabinet to support Churchill's proposal, made in the darkest hour of 1940, for a Union between Britain and France. The same spirit inspired the movement for a western European Union that grew steadily and successfully until it issued in the European Community.

A union of free peoples, such a grouping was the aim of the Federal Union from its outset, and it was always inspired by democratic ideals. But its inspiration was, ultimately, the abolition of war. Not banning particular weapons, not arms control, not any form of political juggling, but the end of the social cancer that war entails. With the false dawn of the United Nations ("we the peoples .... determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war") there was a slackening of support. But the UN was never federal and that has been its principal weakness.

## III. WHY FEDERALISM?

### DIVERSITY IN UNITY

What does world political unity require? First, it must accommodate the human diversity that is so important to us all, respecting individual differences and giving space to social groups that diverge from their neighbours. Unless this is achieved, unity will either not occur, or not endure.

This rules out a unitary or centralised system, controlled from one place, as the empires of the past - Roman, Chinese or British - were run from Rome, Peking or London. Not only is the world too vast, but these examples give clear evidence of the inevitability of collapse of such reliance upon coercive power structures. Instead we must seek a system that, while preserving the essential capacity of society to act in the common good, yet retains the democratic basis that comes from the sovereignty of the individuals that compose it.

### PHILOSOPHIC BASIS; SHARING POWER BY MEANS OF LAW

Federalism is a political philosophy whose aim is the sharing of power in society by means of law. It is concerned particularly with the techniques of

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*An ideal democracy would be one in which the system was not only as efficient technically in sharing power as could be contrived, but also one that gained the willing support of all the sovereign people. Living in a world far from the ideal where politics often yields to force, one can say only that the objectives of federalism and democracy are twins and that insofar as we achieve one we shall also succeed with the other.*

*A federal system is set up to do two opposite things – to prevent a political entity from falling apart and to prevent it being dominated by the centre. Accordingly, it looks both ways – to the centre for cohesion and effectiveness, and to the periphery for freedom. It always tends to be in dynamic tension and its politics are stable but not static.*

achieving that end. It is devoted to allocating power for specific purposes to appropriate levels of government and such 'subsidiarity' is intended to ensure that government remains responsible to the sovereign power, which must ultimately be the individual citizen. Federalism requires the citizen to delegate certain powers upwards, only as the citizen sees fit, but that delegation must be limited in order that certain basic human rights remain in the personal possession of the individual. Ideally the federalism would be one in which that allocation was perfect, i.e. it was made in such a way as conformed to the sovereign will and agreement of all the citizens.

### **FEDERALISM EQUALS DEMOCRACY**

In the view of Hobbes, government, at bottom, is the ordering of society by means of power and force. But that power comes from society itself and governments are delegated, either more or less legitimately, to exercise the power. Politics is the art of controlling government and is thus concerned above all with power and the use of force in society. An ideal society would be one in which that control is exercised through the will and agreement of all those subject to the government but this ideal, like most others, is not easy to achieve.

Democracy asserts the sovereignty of the individual and is primarily concerned with ways of achieving it. These ways may be extremely diverse and as society becomes more complex there may be extreme difficulty in ensuring success. Nevertheless, an ideal democracy would be one in which the system was not only as efficient technically in sharing power as could be contrived, but also one that gained the willing support of all the sovereign people. Living in a world far from the ideal, where politics often yields to force, one can say only that the objectives of federalism and democracy are twins and that insofar as we achieve one we shall also succeed with the other

When building federal units from the bottom up, moreover, the language of force may disguise the crucial importance in all societies, but especially democratic ones, of the development of common agreements, institutions, frameworks, habits of give and take, mutual commitments, contracts, self-restraints in the common interest and so on. The EU has no panzer divisions, but the writ of its Court runs throughout the Union and its legislation is enforced in the law of member states. And in global politics, one current European difference with the US imperial view is the search for "common security" of the kind that now exists within the Union, instead of imposed solutions echoing the power politics of the past. World federation, likewise, will emerge through dialogue and the step by step building of appropriate joint institutions and shared power.

### **FEDERALISM IN ACTION**

The word means both a political theory and an ideal. It is concerned with the control and proper use of power. It deals with the reality of power in government and, by strictly defining where, how and by whom such power shall be exercised, it protects the people from the excesses of rulers. Federalism requires an agreed constitution, the division of powers and a democratic temper in the citizens to enable it to function properly. It is not an easy option for governance. A federal system is set up to do two opposite things – to prevent a political entity from falling apart and to prevent it being dominated by the centre. Accordingly, it looks both ways - to the centre for cohesion and effectiveness, and to the periphery for freedom. It always tends to be in dynamic tension and its politics are stable but not static. Federalism may be seen as the quintessence of democracy, for its goal is to return sovereignty to the people unless there are

compelling reasons which the people accept for leaving power in the hands of the governors.

## **PREVIOUS FAILURES**

The attempts to produce governance of large areas by means of quasi-autonomous units, such as happened with deliberation in the Soviet Union from the 1930's, by political appeasement of ethnic groups as in Austro-Hungary before 1914 or by default in the China of the war-lords era, have never proved successful. Large-scale international attempts such as the League of Nations and the United Nations, though having high aspirations to manage interstate relations peacefully, failed to transcend power politics with the common rule of law. The assumption of leadership of a league of allies, as by Athens in its heyday, was also a failure and is not likely to be more successful when practised by the United States in the 21st century.

## **FEDERALIST SUCCESSES**

However, the practical successes of federalism over the past 250 years, suggest that it is a method of organising politically over large areas that can be more successful than any of these. Switzerland and the United States of America are the most notable examples. The latter has a constitution that has lasted virtually without major change for over 200 years, longer than any other comparable institution. Despite a huge metamorphosis towards greater central government and the rise of corporate power – foreseen by de Tocqueville as the greatest potential threat to American democracy – its federal principles remain resilient and are hotly defended by both citizens and courts. Yet its very success may have proved a snare, since it has misled some into thinking that there is only one road to successful federalism, whereas there may well be many.

## **LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE**

That misleading road may be worth following some of the way. It implies a degree of success and suggests an example to be followed. But there are numerous other federal constitutions which offer relevant guidance which might usefully be brought to bear on the difficult task of achieving human political unity in diversity. We need to be imaginative in adapting known examples to make the innovations necessary for achieving a peaceful world.

## **DETAILS OF THE SYSTEM**

The devil is in the details. That is a hint that the success or failure of a particular federation may owe more to the peculiar features of that constitution than to any strength or weakness of the federal idea. We cannot wave a wand over an area declared to be a federal system and expect it to usher in an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity. Perhaps we can learn more by studying the examples of failed federations, from Rhodesia in Central Africa and the West Indies to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia before 1980.

# **IV. FEDERALIST PRINCIPLES IN OPERATION**

## **POWER DIVIDED**

The chief requirement for a federal system is that powers need to be divided in a democratic, clear and transparent way. This has usually to be achieved by a constitution, setting out in detail where and how political control is exercised. In federal states this has always been assumed to require a fully-fledged and precisely written set of laws and procedures that are justiciable by a federal

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judiciary. Although this may not be universally true, it is probably the best route to success.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY**

Since the One World Trust aims to contribute to the achievement of human unity, it has initiated a pioneering project designed to assist accountability and transparency of political processes in international institutions. These qualities are aids to democracy, which is today a *sine qua non* of a federal system, although it was not always seen to be so. Nevertheless, since democracy is a relative term and the capacity of any society to achieve democracy depends upon its maturity, we may expect that progress towards a universal federal system will be uneven. It will depend upon what political experience and success the society brings to its efforts to federalise its structures.

### **SUBSIDIARITY**

The emphasis placed upon democracy in federalist theory is entirely in keeping with the principle that is often known as subsidiarity. This maintains that power in a federal system should devolve to the smallest unit of the federation that is appropriate for the administration of the function concerned. The point is that the sovereignty of the individual (the fundamental of democracy) requires power to be devolved to social institutions only insofar as that is necessary for their proper working.

### **COMPLEXITY**

Applying this basic idea behind federalism can be complicated. To construct a federal system that will be consonant with efficient government and still enable a democratic process to flourish is not at all easy. The various attempts that have occurred and are in operation in many parts of the world today are directed to these ends and experience that is being gained will surely lead to more and more success in this most difficult of enterprises. But this requires the examples to be studied with a keen appreciation of the need to analyse and study them for that purpose.

### **“AUTHORITY IS FEDERAL”**

As a notable political theorist, Harold Laski, remarked, “authority is federal” by which he meant that it is and should be exercised at several levels. Federalism does not downgrade or exalt authority, but sees this as only valid when it is necessary and required for the benefit of the citizens. Federalism is not dependent upon a fixed constitution and no perfect example exists. It fluctuates with the types of state that exists and it develops with the political development of humankind. ‘The Great Rehearsal’ was the title accorded to the framing of the constitution of the United States of America because it was recognized to be a prototype of the convention for the creation of the United States of the World.

### **DOWNWARD OR “INTEGRAL” FEDERALISM**

This is the development of federal ideas, those which have proved so potent and efficacious for political unions of states as diverse as America, Australia, Canada, India and Germany, into the lower levels of administration. To offer to the communes or localities the same rights for their own needs as cities or states claim for theirs, is to strengthen any society that can accommodate so thorough-going a political reformation. It is an application of federalist theory that seems to apply the same principles of appropriateness to the microcosm that world federalism wants for the macrocosm. This satisfying conception awaits full practical application.

In Europe however, both Germany and Belgium have been converted from centralised states into federations. Spain and Italy have taken big steps along this road and even France and Britain, the most centralised states of Western Europe, are moving towards devolution to regions and nations within. “Integral federalism” would allow a further return of power to localities and communities, empowering citizens to manage their local affairs, an essential counterpart to global unity.

## **STEPS TOWARD A JUST WORLD ORDER**

Actions by governments at international level can usefully be submitted to a double test: their immediate practical utility and whether they contribute to a sustainable more effective federal system of regional and world governance. Will an agreement on climate serve to reduce climate change? Will the institutions used embody the justice, effectiveness and accountability needed to become a legitimate and durable part of the future global constitution? Will an intervention by one or more states in a country save lives and suffering? Will it contribute to or damage the emerging but fragile framework of the global rule of law? Without adjudicating between all the rival ideologies offered to the world, one may offer a way by which the individual can make his own judgement. How far does each of them aid the building of federal institutions that will aid the achievement of human unity? This question may be broken down into separate items; such as whether a particular action by a national government will develop the world economically in such a way that the gap between rich and poor will be lessened or increased. Essentially the aim will be to judge whether policies currently adopted tend to make a federal system more feasible and tend in the direction of a new global order that is slowly and painfully being born or, contrariwise, strengthen the existing order.

*The effect of applying federalist principles is that a great many local services, from street lighting to dog-wardens, are likely to be provided by the commune or parish. The unit of administration closest to electors is the one which has most validity for many of them.*

## **V. EXAMPLES OF FEDERALISM**

### **REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY**

For many centuries it has been assumed that any form of democratic or quasi-democratic participation requires election of chosen representatives, meeting in some sort of an assembly. These have been almost infinite in their variety and the methods of election have varied greatly. But with time the necessary precautions – lists of electors, rigorous control of premises, secret ballot, etc. – have been insisted upon in most countries pretending to democracy.

### **SOVEREIGNTY AND REPRESENTATION**

The basic unit of democratic government may include assemblies of all the citizens, as at a New England town meeting; or at the level of the Swiss canton. There the structure of the federation still relies upon the referendum of the entire citizenry for ultimate validity and democratic legitimacy. That survival, however, does not seem to be applicable in most modern societies and in most their complexity has long since ruled it out.

Nevertheless, it is conceivable (and perhaps likely) that modern electronic inventions will bring back such participation on a very large scale.

Developing and studying new methods to make this possible is now urgent. Federal systems, like others, need to avoid the dangers of complexity (too many levels to vote for, complex ballot papers). The malaise of advanced democracy reflected in low turnout whether for national elections (the US), or

*The enormous scale of some regions or states demand decentralisation of power because the higher federal level of administration would be overwhelmed by the wealth of problems entailed.*

local and European ones (UK) requires not only response from politicians, but reflection and experiment on the best means to communicate with citizens of our multilayered democracies and involve them in choice of policy.

### **COMMUNE OR COMMUNITY**

The effect of applying federal principles is that a great many local services, from street lighting to dog-wardens, are likely to be provided by the commune or parish. The unit of administration closest to electors is the one which has most validity for many of them. It has to be remembered that for a majority of people, the politics of society are not things that will occupy the forefront of their minds. They are probably more acutely interested in lit streets and dogs kept under control than in the cavorting of government ministers that can fill the columns of a national press.

### **ORDINARY REACTIONS**

Psephologists and federalist theorists have to recognise that their preoccupations are only intermittently of much interest to the mass of electors. Instead, the majority will rather turn their attention to personal relationships, their job, their immediate surroundings or to entertainment, sports or the arts. But a federal system must appeal to a non-federalist-minded public as well as satisfying the strictures of the political purist.

### **TOWN COUNCILS**

Another level (not higher, but equally valid) may be that of a suburb, town or district and its powers will perhaps cover planning, policing and the collection of refuse. The beginnings of conflict or cooperation will emerge in the relationships of town with commune councillors; and become more marked with the clash or harmony shown in dealing with the next level, i.e. city or area authorities. The inevitable tension that arises in human societies will be just as visible in such situations as elsewhere. The art of politics consists, in part, in avoiding occasion for such conflicts and minimising them by means of skilful construction of constitutions and unwritten practices.

### **REGIONS AND GOVERNMENT**

Depending upon the circumstances of the country – the size of urban or rural populations, types of industry and level of education, etc. – the regional level of government may have been set to cover vast areas, as in Brazil and India. Some, as in the latter, have been formerly self-governing entities. Others, as in Australia, have been the former administrative areas of colonies. Their powers and success have varied widely and in some places such as the former USSR, supposed federal units have had no more than some cultural, rather than political autonomy. In others, such as India and Brazil, regional authorities have been able to act quite independently of other levels of government, for example, in determining planning of towns, or airports and regional transport. The enormous scale of some regions or states demanded decentralisation of power because the higher federal level of administration would be overwhelmed by the wealth of problems entailed.

### **“NATIONAL” FICTIONS: THE SOVIET EXAMPLE**

In many federations, there has been a “national” level of government below the centre, although this may beg the question of what constitutes a nation. The former Soviet Union, for example, was a collection, supposedly a federation, of the multitude of nationalities within its borders. Yet it was seen, and acted, as a single nation-state, with a foreign policy, centralised economic policy and policy on human rights that often had little or no regard for the diversity of interests

of many of its constituent peoples. Its breakdown illustrates quite well why a false federation is inadequate. Despite the cultural autonomy given to some Republics and the universal aspirations of communism, the rule of the Party, not the Rule of Law prevailed. The Union was imperial, not democratic. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia has introduced a new federal constitution but it too faces a formidable task in balancing the real and necessary autonomy given to the regions with the practical needs of effective central government while resisting the temptation to smother democracy. It throws little light as yet on what will constitute a true and satisfactory federation.

### **THE CHINESE EXAMPLE**

Sheer size and diversity of language and geography seem to have determined the effective surrender of large economic powers by the present Chinese government, which, for example, seems only too happy to see the authorities in Shanghai encouraging a vast expansion of industry and building, with little or no central control. The resulting increase of productive capacity and wealth, it is assumed, will accrue, in part, to the whole of Chinese society and particularly to the central power. Communist China has always operated a system of regional government in which the great majority of civil government expenditure is carried out by the provinces, with central Government redistributing tax revenues to poorer regions on a massive scale. The price paid for this economic decentralisation is tight political control, underlining the challenge China would face if the Party ever relaxed its reins. Through much of its history China has vacillated between powerful centralised authority and disintegration. If it moves one day towards democracy only a well-defined federal structure will, as in Europe or the USA, be able to hold together this vast country, with its multitude of languages and geographic differences.

### **THE USE OF FORCE: THE DOMINANCE OF NATION STATES**

Central government in nation-states has taken, and kept, the ultimate power of control, at least in theory, and always in practice in its retention of military might. This is where the two aspects of sovereignty, internal and external, coincide. China is in some ways the best exemplar of the limits of such practice: although not a federal system, its current political development towards empowerment of the regions challenges central control and requires a new constitutional evolution which recognises limitation on central military power.

By mid-century the rise of China to match, and perhaps surpass, the power of the United States will also have a major implication for the sharing of control of absolute military power. A dramatic shift forward towards global federal authority in arms control will be needed if a new power struggle dwarfing the conflicts of the twentieth century is to be avoided.

## **VI. THE IMPLICATIONS OF FEDERALISM**

### **WHAT SORT OF FEDERALISM WILL PROVIDE BEST FOR HUMAN UNITY?**

Democracy has only been widely accepted, at least in theory, as the proper basis of government, for the past 100 to 150 years. The runaway explosion of population poses new and serious challenges to political ingenuity. But the resulting problems have been so pressing that they seemed to demand immediate and usually, local and improvised solutions.

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## **CONSTITUTION-MONGERING**

So the constitution-makers have, in general, felt that the time is not right for their work, deciding, probably correctly, that once the political will to achieve a federal solution for the world is evident, the work of thrashing out a constitution will become urgent. Then it will be undertaken, but the political in-fighting and manoeuvring will be immense and prove more important than the good or bad points of constitutions then on offer. It is rare to find foresight exercised in political affairs: desperate haste to deal with pressing crises is more common.

## **THE BENEFITS OF PREPARATION**

That is certainly true, but that overlooks the value of having had work already done on federal plans and even complete constitutions. The last 50 years have seen an immense outpouring of political ideas that will make the task of new constitution-makers not only easier, but more fruitful. This is observable in the discussions about a constitution for the European Union. The federalists engage in the discussions with clear ideas about principles and cardinal rules for the creation of new institutions, in a way that was hardly imaginable in 1945 when the United Nations Charter was being written.

## **THE EXAMPLE OF EUROPE**

The creation of the European Union, through its successive stages, constitutes the greatest political innovation since 1945 or 1919, perhaps even since 1787 although its final development has yet to be assessed. Certainly the various experiments and devices that have been tried and tested over the past 50 years exemplify new ways of federal power-sharing that are invaluable guides to what can and should be done to build the new institutions that will enable larger societies to live in peace and harmony.

## **THE WORK OF THE FEDERALIST THEORIES**

Beginning before the Second World War a bevy of political writers have worked at giving theoretical answers to the creation of new federal institutions. Is a constitution for the European Union now the answer to the present problems of enlargement? Only, one may suspect, if it makes provision for the Union to continue enlargement, seek a new type of relationship with its neighbours and offer itself as a model and catalyst for the establishment of a universal constitution. It would be a betrayal of the principles of the founders and of their federalist supporters if the EU did not try to point the way and act as a pilot plant for a greater union – a federal union of the entire planet.

## **WHAT SHALL WE NEED?**

One lesson lies in the process which has brought the EU so far. It is only now, after half a century, that the EU is ready for something like a constitution. But it has not got so far by accidental incremental intergovernmentalism. Thwarted, in the 1950s, in the attempt to draft a federal constitution or political union, Europeans adopted instead what can be called the Monnet method – of agreeing specific steps to deal with real common needs but doing it in a way which contained an enduring federal element. Thus the founding Coal and Steel Community dealt with the need to permit Germany's industrial recovery in a federal partnership of equals under a High Authority and with an elected parliamentary assembly and a court. The next key step, the economic community or common market, retained these key federal elements for the economy as a whole, and prepared the ground for the later key step of direct election of the Parliament. The Single European Act in turn led to the completion of the Single Market and opened the

way to a Monetary Union. The Monetary Union and enlargement in turn forced an increase in the Parliament's real powers.

A world federal government is also unlikely to be brought suddenly to birth by agreement on a global constitution. Rather key incremental steps are needed towards the long-term goal of an effective, democratic world government. One such step has been the creation of the International Criminal Court. Another might be a series of steps towards a world parliament. Another might be the creation of a global community to counter the devastation of climate change, and yet another some breakthrough on nuclear disarmament and reform of the Security Council.

The second lesson from the EU is that the world is too large and its problems too complex to deal with all of them from the centre. What the EU has done and is doing is providing an example for other regions. If the world is to be united in a peaceful and lawful future, it will be necessary to achieve elsewhere the same sort of regional unity that has already been achieved, if slowly, in Europe. That, in some ways, could be easier.

For example, unlike Europe, South America has only two principal languages that are used throughout the entire continent. Africa is also an area where three colonial languages (English, French and Arabic) have been imposed and are used by the elite everywhere.

## **MEANS OF PROGRESS**

The route to such regional unions cannot be left entirely to the regions. For example, unless the spread of nuclear weapons is brought under control at global level there is little hope that India and Pakistan will be ready to engage in negotiations together with the other members of South Asian Regional Cooperation for a unified sub-continent. Nor is there any hope that Israel and its Arab neighbours will bring about the much-needed unity of the Near East that will be necessary until the United States ceases to use Israel as its permanent and favoured military ally in the region. Even in the economic field, hegemonic outside powers can hold back regional unity by upholding wider arrangements which they dominate simply by the divide and rule concept. Thus the US deliberately blocked Japan's initiative for an Asian Monetary Union which might have rescued its neighbours from the 1998 financial crisis. Instead of a residual neo-colonial relation with a former imperial power, warm cooperation between Britain and France to support Africa's federal aspirations would be a help. Until the United Nations is able to keep a semblance of peace or at least moderate our current arms-races there is little scope for many regions to manage their necessary steps towards unity. A world Community of Communities needs to be born, both through diverse initiatives in the regions and a strategic effort to transform the UN into an effective federal authority meeting the common challenges that demand global solutions.

## **UNTIDINESS IS ALL – PRINCIPLES NOT THEORY**

The world will not be united in uniformity. Diversity in unity has to be the watchword. This will require tolerance and toleration, not something that many societies find easy to bestow upon rivals, or even upon their own citizens. But until they do manage to live and let live their story will be a continued sorry tale of conflict and chaos. The meek may inherit the earth, but they will have a hard time until the bruisers have battered each other into quiescence or learnt through crisis that better ways must and can be found to resolve differences and give expression to common interests through institutions and the rule of law.

*The growing interdependence of humans and our dependence on the ailing natural world require us to achieve a hitherto unwonted political unity of purpose and of action. Because the Trust believes that human unity is the urgent need of our time and that the most serious failure is of political unity, it concentrates its efforts in the direction of remedying that political failure. And, since the Trust is convinced that authoritarian unity will be neither acceptable, nor durable, it seeks federalist solutions to the creation of unity.*

## Global Responsibility – Reaching Beyond National Sovereignty

The concept of federalism has fallen out of favour within the British political debate. It is misrepresented as a political philosophy in favour of a large centralised superstate taking power from national governments and democracies. In recent years, the debate over globalisation has begun to cover issues of how global decisions should be taken. But this debate is taking place without a key philosophy underpinning or informing it. As a consequence, the institutional solutions put forwards to solve global problems all too often lack the key elements which will help to ensure greater democratic involvement. The Global Responsibility pamphlet series examines the relevance of federalist ideas to the globalisation debate.

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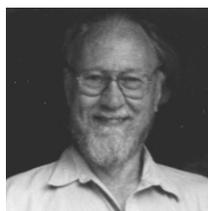
## VII. CONCLUSION

### THE ROLE OF THE TRUST IN THE ACHIEVEMENT OF FEDERALISM

The growing interdependence of humans and our dependence on the ailing natural world require us to achieve a hitherto unwonted political unity of purpose and of action. Because the Trust believes that human unity is the urgent need of our time and that the most serious failure is of political unity, it concentrates its efforts in the direction of remedying that political failure. And, since the Trust is convinced that authoritarian unity will be neither acceptable, nor durable, it seeks federalist solutions to the creation of unity. This entails working with like-minded movements and offering help to federalist thinkers and activists.

### BREADTH OF APPROACH

It seeks to bring the lessons and principles of democratic federalism to bear on all routes to human unity: the need for reform of the economic system and the management of the world's physical environment. It appreciates of the value of working with civil society as a whole. Achieving the aim of the Trust will require cooperation, creative thinking and joint efforts by millions of people – world citizens in spirit if not in name – and the Trust is eager to play its part in helping these efforts to bear fruit.



**JOHN ROBERTS**

*A committed world federalist for over 50 years, John Roberts is the author of World Citizenship and Mundialism (1999) and several pamphlets. He collaborated on the writing of the history of the Federal Union in The Pioneers (1990) and previously chaired the World Federalist Movement. An Esperantist, he has taught in colleges and universities in England and Quebec.*

The One World Trust promotes education and research into the changes required within global organisations in order to achieve the eradication of poverty, injustice and war. It conducts research on practical ways to make global organisations more responsive to the people they affect, and on how the rule of law can be applied equally to all. It educates political leaders and opinion-formers about the findings of its research.

Its guiding vision is a world where all peoples live in peace and security and have equal access to opportunity and participation.



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