



Our common goods in the European Union

Patrick Riordan SJ

Later this month, voters in the United Kingdom will decide whether or not they want to remain in the European Union. Arguments on both sides are dominating the current political landscape, but Patrick Riordan SJ is worried about the lack of depth to the referendum debates: 'we have neglected to form the political culture in which a reasonable debate about membership of the EU can take place.'

'NHS doctor leaves family in Sheffield to join Islamic State in Syria.'¹ Such recent news headlines bring home to us a great anomaly which can shock: there is no guarantee that a western style education to the highest levels of achievement in secular disciplines brings with it an adoption of liberal values and a commitment to the shared culture of a pluralist secular world. Osama bin Laden was a western trained engineer; many of those who are targets for radicalisation in our universities are studying for degrees in natural and human sciences, technology, engineering and medicine. The value of a regime which allows individuals and communities the freedoms to foster their own identities and traditions on the basis of reciprocal respect for the identities and cultures of others is not always acknowledged by those who have benefited from it.

Have our educators swallowed whole the assumption that modernisation driven by economic and social development would lead to the demise of religion and associated forms of fanaticism and fundamentalism? Have we taken it for granted that exposure to liberal pluralist values of itself would lead to adoption of those values? The shock effect of the news report of a British-trained physician joining ISIS raises these questions for us. Has our education system and indeed our political culture failed to communicate the values and form the quality of citizens and participants on which we rely for our way of life?



Panic responses such as the CONTEST agenda are not sufficient to remedy the defect.

A similar question is provoked by the Brexit debate. It is curious how the terms of the debate are formulated in prognoses of costs and benefits of the alternatives of staying or leaving the European Union. Were the reasons for belonging only ever economic? And if other reasons were significant, why aren't we literate in them, why haven't

we a familiarity with them, so that we can invoke, discuss and, if necessary, criticise them? As we have educated people in sciences and technology but not in citizenship, politics and religion, we have neglected to form the political culture in which a reasonable debate about membership of the EU can take place.

Slogans like 'Britain Stronger in Europe' come to mind. We may hear and see such statements frequently, but what do they mean? What does this strength actually consist in? Here is one answer, which is rarely articulated in the debate: we have responsibilities, and we are strong when we have the appropriate institutions to realise those responsibilities and to achieve worthwhile objectives. In other words, strength manifests itself in the exercise of solidarity and subsidiarity, and this means that the now familiar rhetoric of British politicians about what is best for Britain exclusively is misplaced.

The principle of solidarity reminds us that our common humanity, our interdependence, and our knowledge of the plight of our neighbours oblige us to take steps to deal with the problems that affect them. Some may deny that we have responsibilities for others. But ethicists identify for us the grounds of obligation: if there is someone in need; if you have the capacity to do something about it; and if you are nearby, then you have a responsibility to act.

Need, capacity and proximity make you responsible. To act effectively to fulfil this responsibility, we need appropriate institutions at different levels, global (for example, the United Nations) and regional or continental (for example, the EU). Unlike NATO, for example, the purpose of which from its foundation has been to offer military security to Europe, the needs to be addressed by the EU and therefore its corresponding capacities are not narrowly identified. The range of needs is wider than but includes security, given the ancestry of the Union in the rebuilding of relationships between countries and nations which had been bitter enemies. 1870, 1914, 1939: within a span of only 70 years Germany and France had been three times in a vicious war. That is the headline example, but other countries can be named too. Italy and Germany in the Spanish Civil War, Poland and Czechoslovakia as victims of Nazi Germany, and recently the turmoil in the Balkans following the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

In addition to military security, there is a less tangible but even more important bulwark against war in the bonds of solidarity and the cultivation of familiarity with each other and one another's problems, and the collaboration in institutions which are designed to address those problems. Very much aware of the dangers of war and the associated consequences, those who created the European Union have worked to build safeguards against war by creating these bonds and fostering collaboration in structures of shared responsibility. As a current member of the EU, Britain accepts it must play its part in exercising that responsibility; to decide to leave is to declare an unwillingness to be responsible, along with others, for the maintenance of a common good: the peace we take for granted. The EU would be very much weaker without the presence of the UK and its capacity to act would be diminished. In this context, the example of the USA,

which has been a leading player in NATO, deserves notice and emulation. The USA might well have decided to leave Europe to its fate: why should its taxpayers contribute to the security of Europe? We in Europe have perhaps taken it for granted that they should and have not been too scrupulous in offering our thanks. But their involvement in NATO is an example of a country accepting a responsibility and bearing the costs associated with it for the sake of benefits and values which accrue to others as well as to itself.

The needs which motivate the collaboration of the state members of the European Union go beyond security. Inequalities in opportunities for education and employment, inequalities in standards of living, inequalities in health provision and other infrastructures, have called forth a sharing of responsibility to help one another. While the European project is built on support for a market economy, it has always wanted to avoid fostering the kind of competitiveness which would allow each member to look after its own interests exclusively, and 'let the devil take the hindmost'. The endorsement of social capitalism in the EU has wanted to see the market-driven economy as an instrument for other common goods, which we usually summarise as wellbeing, welfare or flourishing. An economy which allows some to founder without support, which can tolerate the exclusion of some from participation and from benefiting from wealth creation, is foreign to the European ideal. This has been the value at the heart of the Common Agricultural Policy ensuring we did not foster a destructive competitiveness among our agricultural sectors but guaranteed a viable basis for traditional ways of life. The ideal has been a noble one. The institutions and arrangements have not always been successful, having unintended consequences, for instance the closure of food markets to African producers and the destruction of some African markets by dumping subsidised produce against which local producers could not compete. The implementation of the policy is constantly in need of review and adjustment, but the commitment to addressing inequalities has meant that wealthier and stronger countries have been willing to support measures to help weaker and poorer regions and states to catch up. This ambition to tackle inequality is still worth supporting, all the more so in a world which is growing more unequal.

Whether on a national or an international scale, institutions are problems as well as solutions. Recent political issues in the UK have included the overcrowding and ineffectiveness of prisons, and the inability to keep them free of drugs and weapons; the industrial relations issues involving junior doctors that have convulsed the NHS; the proposal and subsequent retraction of the plan to universalise the transition of all schools to academies; and the reported inadequacy of welfare provision for children. These all involve the institutions on which we rely. If our national institutions exhibit crises, we do not expect to solve the problems by abandoning the institutions, but we recognise the need to reform and improve them. That the European institutions have flaws, and are perceived to be inefficient and overly bureaucratic, should not surprise us, and should not necessarily move us to think we improve the situation by abandoning them. As in the domestic case, reform and improvement are required, and it is there that responsibility is to be exercised.

Interestingly, the EU articulates among its values the principle of subsidiarity, a principle which provides ammunition for those who wish to reform the institutions. This principle means that responsibility for taking action should be located at the lowest possible level in a hierarchically structured organisation. A distorted form of this has been implemented in the UK when central government has devolved to local government the responsibility for deciding what cuts in services and welfare provision are to be made, while deciding centrally what resources are to be made available. Proper subsidiarity should allow for the raising of revenue at the local level as well, something the EU facilitates, whereas the UK does not. The role of central government, according to the principle of subsidiarity, is to support and assist the agencies which are as close to the ground and to the beneficiaries as possible. Reform and improvement can invoke this value of subsidiarity as well as that of solidarity.

Last year we observed the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta. It is notable that this document securing the rights of barons (subsequently revoked) has always been acclaimed in America more than in Britain as a step on the road to the assertion of the rights of persons, on which the legitimacy and the purpose of the modern state is based. But it is part of a heritage in which Britain has played a significant part, namely, the rule of law. Nowadays the rule of law entails reco-

gnition and respect for the rights of everyone, without discrimination on arbitrary grounds. Within Europe of course the EU and its institutions is not the only forum for the maintenance and promotion of rights, although it has been significant in developing the rights of workers. The European Convention on Human Rights with its Court of Human Rights is another, for the creation of which Winston Churchill shares considerable responsibility. He saw respect for human rights and their enforcement through appropriate instruments as essential to safeguarding against a recurrence of the crimes against persons associated with totalitarian regimes. It seems that rejection of the European Human Rights regime is linked to the rejection of the European Union, a separate institution. But in both cases rejection involves the desire to abandon responsibility for a shared culture in Europe based on respect for the rule of law, a common good. It is the relinquishing of the responsibility, held along with our neighbours, which is at stake here. And it is not as if there is on the table a proposal of how those responsibilities might otherwise be exercised. The institutions in place are there for this purpose, even if they are inadequate and in need of reform and adjustment. We have a responsibility, as Churchill acknowledged, as our people have recognised many times in the past, and it is a responsibility we are called upon to exercise again now.

Some of the ideas I have expressed above have been voiced in the debates, but only in the crassest way possible, inviting exaggeration and ridicule. So the attempt by the Prime Minister to raise the security issue is parodied by portraying it as a threat that World War III will break out following a vote to leave. The lack of depth in the discussion of some of these themes, in particular our responsibility as a state for the maintenance of a quality of relations between neighbouring states and in the global context, reflects the absence of awareness of the values that have motivated the creation and maintenance of the European Union. That absence is due to the neglect of the political culture and its leaders to explain why our membership of the Union might also be 'Best for Europe' as well as being 'Best for Britain'. It is due to the illiteracy about our common goods, which include these values listed above: a culture of shared responsibility, the rule of law, familiarity with each other in our differences, relationships that are friendly and conducive to cooperation, concern for the victims

and the excluded, and willingness to bear costs which benefit all, if not primarily ourselves.

The superficiality in the debates about non-economic issues is due to the same kind of blindness and neglect which leaves us shocked at NHS doctors joining ISIS (recall too the Glasgow airport attack, also perpetrated by a doctor). As John Stuart Mill observed, if we take some things for granted and fail to subject them to constant discussion and critique, we repeat them without understanding, to the point that they become empty formulae, incapable of communicating meaning.

‘[E]ven if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. ... becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience.’²

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¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/24/nhs-doctor-leaves-family-in-sheffield-to-join-isil-in-syria/>

² John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859) edited by H.B. Acton, London: Dent, 1972, pp. 120-21.