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## European Identity - Fact or Myth?

by Keith Best

*From a speech by Keith Best at the 28th European Economic Forum: 4-6 September 2018 Krynica, Poland, "A Europe of Common Values or A Europe of Common Interests?"*

European values and interests are both evolving all the time, as is the national identities of the states.

Through migration, changing norms of societal behavior, changes in religious affiliation, increased exposure to other values, cultures and cuisine, the profile of all our states is changing. For some of our citizens, that is uncomfortable as the familiar territory of only a few years ago is now very different. That has manifested itself in concern about the unequal distribution of benefit through globalization, scapegoating migrants and a reaction to the multicultural society in which our citizens find themselves. There is no doubt that the main motivations for those who voted for Britain to leave the EU were not so much about the common rules and regulations, but about a sense of disenfranchisement.

There is always a counter-intuition about this debate as, on one hand, there is the fear of migration changing the established norms, habits and way of life (often stimulated through sometimes unconscious and subliminal but deeply seated racism) and, on the other hand, the recognition that migrant workers are essential in a range of sectors.

Beyond economic considerations, the revolution in the recognition of discrimination against women and ethnic groups, and LGBTI rights may have been brewing for a long time, but these changes have been disconcerting to some. Many societies have been as unprepared for these changes as they have been for the increase in migration and that fault must lie partly at the door of governments. So much more could have been

done by forward thinking politicians. Instead, many merely echo concerns over these trends, often for short-term political populist gain.

If we look at common trends now in much of Europe they include a demonstration of these sensitivities – a move to the political right and intolerance of migrants, especially asylum seekers, a growth of nationalism and retreat into introversion and a shift away from a belief in international co- operation, including free trade, as a way of improving the condition of the people. Increasingly, these political views will come into conflict with religious ones – not least as all the major religions embrace a welcome to the stranger and charity to the poor and needy.

There are also the economic consequences of the loss of financial confidence which could carry contagion outside Europe. Thanks to the uncertainty over Brexit, the UK has seen business investment decrease £22 billion from what it would have been – at a time when investment in infrastructure and training is so necessary for productivity. All this, coupled with arguably an over-valued asset market, is a recipe for forthcoming woe. The world, let alone Europe, cannot afford to have Europe implode.

It is the fate and inelegance of most politicians always to be fighting today's battles and problems with yesterday's weapons and not able to anticipate what may come -- unlike Churchill who, in his own words, tried to "peer through the mists of the future to the end of the war," once victory had been achieved, and think about how to re-build and maintain peace on a shattered continent.

We are asked to examine whether we have a Europe of Common Values or a Europe of Common Interests? This underpins another debate between religious values and political interests, which creates its own tensions. Can they be reconciled? Yet to ask the question misunderstands the debate. Religious values underpin most political philosophies even if their provenance is not acknowledged.

Europe has shown itself adept at formalizing and enshrining those values that were so obvious to civilized living in the wake of the World Wars. A notable contribution was made by Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, a leading British Conservative politician who had been one of the prosecutors at Nuremberg, who was instrumental in drafting a large part of the Council of Europe's Convention on Human Rights.

The scope of that treaty of course, encompasses 47 countries, a far wider reach than the EU, stretching from Albania and Armenia to Georgia, Turkey, Ukraine and Russia. It enshrines the common values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

These core values and their counterparts in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights may have had their roots in Judaeo-Christian philosophy but they were enshrined in secular language and are now accepted as norms that have a global reach. It is true that the East produced a different strand of thought in Confucianism and authoritarianism which is now challenging the utility of democracy in providing wellbeing for the people. It is true, also, that the concentration on individual rights and

responsibilities is different from the greater regard given to collective groups but respect for the dignity and safeguarding of the individual is now interwoven with concepts of rights for groups.

It remains alarming that there are still so many people who cannot distinguish the Council from the EU. Arguably, in the UK, one of the greatest arguments for Leavers was the desire to regain sovereignty and much anger has been directed against the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (the creature of the Council) when the true bile was meant to be directed against the European Court based in Luxembourg. I trust that I have given some explanation of European common values, especially in recent times, but what of interests? They, like values, have changed with the times. For most of the last millennium those interests were in deep competition as different countries vied with each other for global empires or were consumed among themselves over territorial and religious conflicts. It would have been difficult at any stage to discern a common interest. That changed some seventy years ago after those countries, showing that common values were insufficient to avert conflict, discovered that the only way forward was to share a common interest in peace and trade. We now live in the greatest trading bloc in the world. Of course, that requires some surrender of sovereignty but even the most nationalist of countries understands that pooling sovereignty can lead to a greater, not lesser, influence.

Security is a major common interest in combating terrorism and cyber crime and requires enormous co-operation between security forces, the police, Interpol and sharing information. Moreover, if the USA is serious about withdrawing more from Europe and concentrating on its Pacific hinterland then, increasingly, Europe will need to find its own solutions. These are matters requiring collective action and not state individualism.

We are living in an interconnected world in which communications, transportable skills and, indeed, cyber attacks do not respect national boundaries.

This is not a time for separation but for coming together and exploiting what we have in common rather than what divides us.

There will continue to be many areas in which common interests will not prevail and it is wrong to try to impose unanimity. Sometimes foreign affairs and certainly much domestic policy will not have a universal common interest. After centuries of internal conflict, however, often drawing in much of the rest of the planet, the creation of a Europe of common interests has been one of the greatest achievements in the world. It is a precious jewel that we must keep and develop at all costs. For the sake of ourselves and our children we must rebuild trust in international co-operation and institutions otherwise both humanity and our environment will pay the price.

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