Between spheres

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Luuk van Middelaar

THE PASSAGE TO EUROPE
Translated by Liz Waters
352pp. Yale University Press. £25 (US $40).
978 0 300 18112 8

In much that has been written about the European Union, its institutions are separated so sharply from the beliefs which animate them that they lose all life. Instead of being spectators at a drama with an uncertain outcome, readers find themselves more in the position of medical students observing the dissection of a corpse.

When beliefs do enter into studies of the EU, they enter as a teleology, a last stand, so to speak, of the belief in progress. Visitors to the Commission and Parliament in Brussels regularly note that quasi-religious attitude, the implicit question and test: are you with us or against us? In academic writing on the Union the additional result is to make the writer appear as a "client", a suspicion which generous subsidies from Brussels do nothing to dispel.

It is refreshing to encounter a new book so free of these weaknesses. *The Passage to Europe* is by a young Dutchman, Luuk van Middelaar, who has the advantage of being both an insider and an outsider. With an academic background in political philosophy, van Middelaar has worked in the Dutch Parliament, while currently acting as an adviser and speech-writer to Herman van Rompuy, the President of the European Council. Van Middelaar's book (updated from the 2009 Dutch original) is both philosophically informed and historically sensitive, treating European integration as an open-ended project which has achieved much, but has, so far, failed to put down deep roots in the soil of public opinion.

Van Middelaar offers a subtle and detailed account of the evolution of the Union. His account is original in the categories he introduces for his analysis. He follows developments not just in what he calls the "outer sphere" of states and the "inner sphere" of the formal institutions established successively in the Coal and Steel Community, the European Economic Community and European Community, and, most recently, the EU. He calls attention, too, to developments in an "intermediate sphere" of less formalized relations between the member states, developments he associates with the emergence of the European Council in 1974.

This intermediate sphere, Van Middelaar contends, is the real locus of power in the Union. The description is justified, he claims, by the way the European Council has "dual" capacities. Its members, the heads of governments, are "representatives both of the constituent powers (severally) and the constituted power (jointly)". In making a convincing case he provides what I am tempted to call a "common law" account of the development of the Union, an account, that is, of the relations between the three spheres. It is this common law which has enabled member states to limit the pretensions of the Commission and the European Parliament (the "inner sphere"), while engaging member states in a way that they had probably not originally intended. National leaders acquire the sense of a collective interest which may entail national sacrifices. This informal development, the book suggests, is often far more effective than the openly proclaimed, "federalist" ambitions of the inner sphere.

Van Middelaar introduces and adapts models from classical political thought when developing his account. He deploys Machiavelli's notions of fortune, necessity and political skill (*virtù*) when discussing stages in the passage to Europe: a foundational period (1950–57), the building of the Community (1958–89), and its reconstruction since the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe (1989 until the present). He uses a classical dilemma in exploring how a *demos*, the shared identity of a people, might be acquired. He turns back to front Rousseau's emphasis on a social contract or unanimous consent that "must" precede representation and majority rule, arguing that a *demos* can be created gradually through effective political leadership with its legitimacy eventually read backwards (a view espoused by Hume). That, after all, is how most European national identities were created.

One of the most welcome aspects of this book is the way its author remains constructive, even while recognizing that the Union suffers from a significant democratic deficit. His Dutch background probably helps to explain that balance in his writing. For no EU member state has seen a more dramatic shift in opinion about integration than the Netherlands in recent years. From being the standard-bearer of a kind of Euro-idealism, it has become almost British in its scepticism.

What does Van Middelaar make of the eurozone crisis and its impact on opinion? His book appeared in Dutch before the crisis was full-blown. So while he refers to it a number of times, he does not really explore the question. This is a pity, for it might have led him into a deeper analysis of the crisis of opinion about integration which is spreading across the continent today.

It would be useful, for example, to distinguish between a democratic deficit and a "crisis of legitimacy". To some extent, the idea of a democratic deficit is inherent in the idea of representative government. There is always a gap between public opinion, which is shifting and not necessarily coherent, and the needs of a political class to formulate coherent public policy – needs which call for leadership and justify some degree of deficit. By contrast, a crisis of legitimacy exists when there is deep and pervasive uncertainty about the location of final political authority.

Van Middelaar's argument about the role of the intermediate sphere in Europe could also be used to throw light on at least one source of the crisis of opinion in Europe today. For if the work of the European Council involves and helps to educate ministers and other members of national executives in the affairs of the Union, it is much less successful in reaching and educating the parliamentary classes of member states. That, in turn, means that it has failed to employ the chief existing means provided by the political systems of member states for mobilizing and shaping public opinion across the continent. Indeed, it has given national parliamentary classes an excuse for distancing themselves from the European project.

Here we come up against a major unintended consequence of direct election of the European Parliament. The original model for a European assembly was for one with its members chosen from national parliaments. The move to direct election of the European Parliament (in 1979) cut the link between national parliamentary classes and the European project. The move was, to say the least, premature. The steadily falling turnouts for successive Europe-wide parliamentary elections are noted with concern by Van Middelaar. Yet the failure of the European Parliament to develop any ability to mobilize and shape consent across the continent has, in fact, created a major threat to political life across Europe.

While the European Parliament has not developed any hold over opinion, its powers have nonetheless been steadily increased. What is the upshot? On the one hand, we have national parliaments that retain popular authority, while their power has been steadily reduced; on the other hand, we have the European Parliament which has increased powers, but very little popular authority. This situation opens the door to populism. For the question arises: who represents us? And uncertainty about the answer to that question is the seedbed of populism. It can call into question the claims of representative government as such.

The effects of the eurozone crisis on public opinion across the continent make this an urgent concern. For the crisis has undoubtedly rekindled national animosities and suspicions – both among the recipient states and among the donor states. It could also undermine the habit of co-operation and the common law tradition that Luuk van Middelaar so persuasively explores and defends in this book.

Right numbers

IAN CAWOOD

Stuart Ball

PORTRAIT OF A PARTY
The Conservative Party in Britain 1918–1945
591pp. Oxford University Press. £85 (US $160).
978 0 19 966798 7

It is sometimes casually said that one is born a Liberal, grows to be a Socialist and then becomes a Conservative in middle age. However, Kingsley Amis, a man who might be seen to embody this cliché, evinced that one's political evolution can actually be explained as a result of growing frustration with politics rather than merely the reactionary tendencies of the old. "Growing older, I have lost the need to be political, which means . . . the need to be left. I am driven to grudging toleration of the Conservative Party because it is the party of non-politics, of resistance to politics."

For at least the past thirty years, the British Conservative Party has been associated with a dogmatic and, at times (such as the present), very inflexible economic philosophy. After their years in the wilderness before the First World War, however, the Tories had learned to be a deliberately broad political party which could accommodate a variety of beliefs, or, as in Amis's case, none at all, as they confronted the nascent Labour Party. In his latest study of the Conservative Party of the early twentieth century, Stuart Ball, of the University of Leicester, sets out to prove that, although the Party has always had principles, it has not always suffered from the affliction of an ideology. Historians such as E. H. H. Green and Nigel Keohane have previously shown that the Conservatives learned to move beyond their unproductive pre-war obsessions with Irish Home Rule, Tariff Reform and defence of landed interests, and Professor Ball clinically dissects a party that, in Hugh Cecil's oft-quoted phrase, had "come from many converging streams" to form the dominant political machine of the interwar years.

Ball has been criticized in the past for employing an outmoded, empirically driven approach to history, but as he ably demonstrates in his chapter "The Public: Appeal and support", even political historians have managed to integrate cultural and linguistic approaches. Having edited an excellent collection of Conservative election posters last year, published as *Dole Queues and Demons*, Ball here investigates the role of canvassing, political propaganda, public meetings, and the radio and cinema in a concise and deft analysis of how a sophisticated political party communicates a message to the electorate. In the final chapters, he paints a series of excellent pen portraits of the Conservative ministers and leaders of the period in a witty and authoritative tone which recalls the work of the much-missed Ben Pimlott.

In many ways, those chapters are the high point of the book. The depth of detail that underpins the study of the party organization from grass-roots constituency associations to Central Office may be too much for some readers. It is, however, difficult to see how such material could have been excluded, if the aim is to produce a complete picture of Conservative political culture in this period. The wisdom of any such attempt to write a "total history" is open to history, but future political historians will be grateful to Ball for attempting such a mammoth undertaking.

Much more successful, as an example of data-mining, is the innovative analysis of Conservative electoral support based on the occupational data from the 1931 census. Ball establishes that working-class Tory voters did not, as is often claimed, first emerge during Margaret Thatcher's leadership, even if the party rested on a backbone of lower-middle-class support and the working-class male proved an elusive quarry. This book should be essential reading for any modern political historian and for any modern politician, from the humblest constituency envelope-stuffer to the present Prime Minister. Quite a few contemporary lessons can be learnt from the success of Stanley Baldwin, who was willing to change economic direction as the challenging global circumstances dictated and who knew that the public and his party respected a leader who stood up to media barons.