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The EU's Biggest Problem Is a Leadership Deficit

By Harold James

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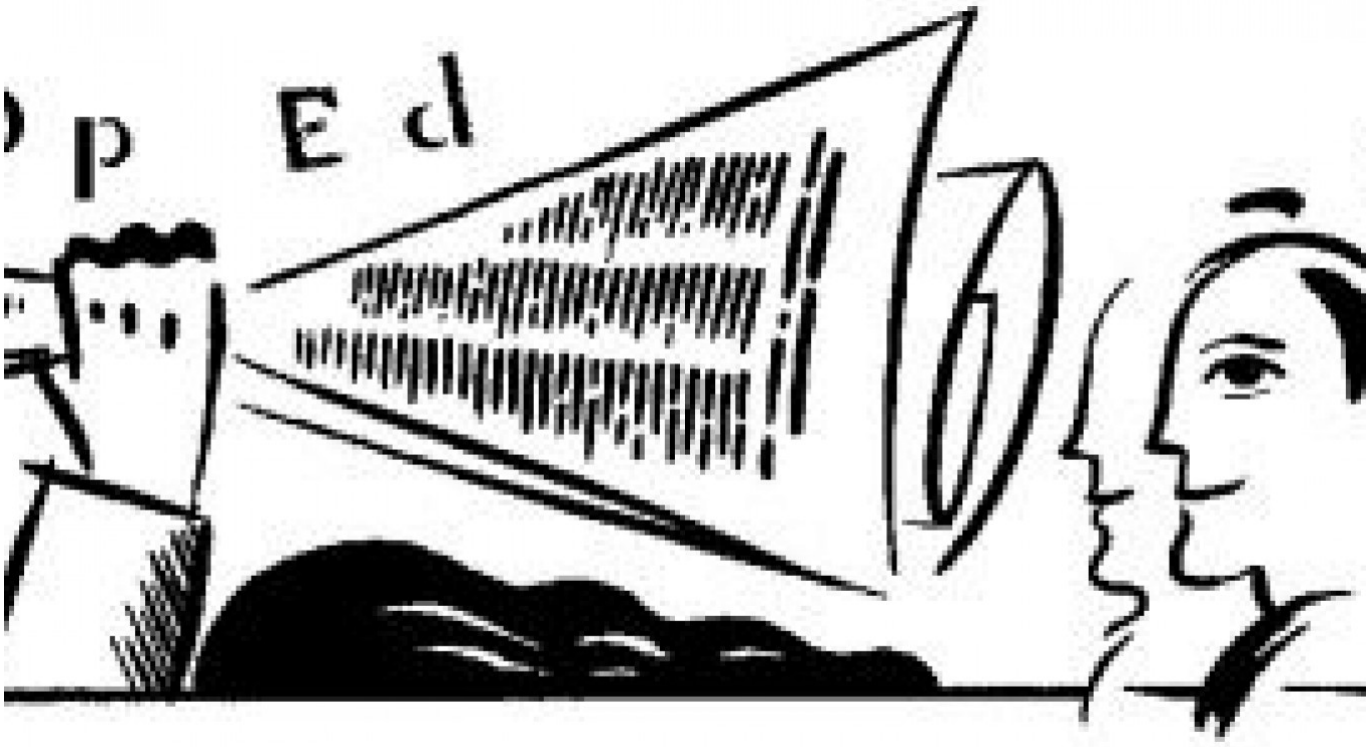

In constructing Europe's monetary union, political leaders did not think through all the implications, which led to major design flaws. Even worse, they do not appear to have learned from that experience, for they are about to take the same approach to the monetary union's political analogue.

The logic of the financial crisis is driving Europeans toward greater integration, which implies new mechanisms for political expression. Well before the crisis, the European Union was widely perceived to be suffering from a "democratic deficit." Now, with many Europeans blaming the EU for painful austerity measures, that complaint has grown more powerful, and Europe's political leaders believe that they must act now to address it.

Unfortunately, Europe confronts another deficit: a lack of political leadership. The charismatic figures of the mid-20th century — British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and French President Charles de Gaulle — have no contemporary counterparts. Citizens associate the EU with, above all, bureaucratic grayness

and technocratic rationality.

European officialdom is now responding to these deficits with an initiative to reform and democratize the European Commission. The commission's president, Jose Manuel Barroso, suggests that ideologically like-minded political parties running in the next European Parliament elections should intensify their cooperation in political "families," which would then jointly nominate candidates for the commission presidency. Voters would thus play a more direct role in choosing a new European chief executive. They would feel as if they were appointing a government. And politicians would need to beef up their charisma to be elected.

This approach has been supported by luminaries such as former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Because it apparently does not imply any real loss of power for national governments, it has achieved a certain acceptance and seems close to being implemented. But that does not make it a good idea. In particular, the perceived need to channel Europe's existing political families into a two-party system, with social democrats on one side and "people's parties" on the other, is deeply problematic.

The two-party parliamentary model emerged in 19th-century Britain. Electors chose only a representative for the House of Commons, and the majority party then appointed the prime minister. The contemporary British comic opera "Iolanthe" celebrated the fact that "every boy and every gal that's born into the world alive is either a little Liberal or else a little Conservative." But what if not every little boy and girl is born that way?

In the stable British model, if a political party is too radical, it will lose the political center in the next election. The parties' rivalry is healthy, though there is a built-in tendency to seek solutions that command a broad social consensus. But such an institutional outcome is not inevitable, and it probably no longer endures even in contemporary Britain.

British lawyers liked to recommend this model to other countries. They were especially persuasive in Britain's former colonies, notably in newly independent African states. The results were disastrous. Citizens could not understand why they should be expected to align their political preferences along a simple left-right spectrum. Instead, politics was usually recast in terms of old intergroup or interethnic tensions.

The contemporary United States also is not a compelling demonstration that competition between two parties leads to increasing moderation and political centrism. On the contrary, the partisan struggle can play to the parties' extremes.

The two-party moderation thesis makes sense only if the main differences concern redistributive preferences in a simple model driven by an almost Marxist kind of economic determinism. The left-wing party wants to redistribute wealth and incomes more, and the right-wing party less. But both need to restrain themselves, and in appealing to the median voter, they become nearly identical alternatives.

In a globally interconnected world, however, a new politics have developed, in which both the left fringe and the right fringe fear that outside competition or influences will limit their ability to shape political choices. Their main political preference then becomes resistance to those external threats. The old left-right polarity no longer works.

Artificially creating a new European polity split between left and right would create new struggles about redistribution and intensify old ones. The only thing that would hold the left together would be the claim that there should be more redistribution. But to whom, and according to what mechanism?

Nor is it clear that Spanish socialists have more in common with German social democrats than with their fellow nationals. Each ideological grouping would most likely become factionalized along complex national lines, divisions likely to be reflected in the ensuing competition to be charismatic. Instead of encouraging new Churchills and Adenauers, the result might be new imitators of Adolf Hitler or Josef Stalin.

There is a better model, one developed in a linguistically, culturally and religiously diverse test tube in the geographic heart of Europe: the Swiss model of konkordanzdemokratie. In the Swiss system, several parties compete, but they do not aim to control the government exclusively. Instead, all the major parties are represented in the government and are consequently obliged to hammer out compromises. Members of the federal government are driven by regional loyalties at some times and by ideological commitments at other times. All these considerations need to be negotiated in the process of making decisions.

The Swiss solution of electing an all-embracing and balanced government tends to produce boring and uninspiring politics. Famously, few people know who even holds Switzerland's annually rotating presidency.

Charismatic politicians act by polarizing, galvanizing and mobilizing supporters. Routine politics, by contrast, requires maintaining a low profile and being willing to strike compromises. Europe today does not need inspirational leaders who can whip up a populist frenzy. Instead, it needs locally respected leaders who are capable of working in a complex and multidimensional political world.

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