

'Confederation or federation', from Le Monde (20 January 1953)

Caption: On 20 January 1953, in the French daily newspaper Le Monde, Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, founder of the Paneuropean Union and the European Parliamentary Union, considers the pros and cons of a European political federation.

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Confederation or federation?

By Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi

The six Member States of the Iron and Steel Community are in the process of establishing a closer association.

The basic question for their statesmen is to determine whether this new association should be more like a confederation or a federation.

At first sight, a confederation would seem preferable, since it maintains the sovereignty of each nation intact, whereas a federation would necessitate relinquishing some sovereignty to a common authority.

A good example of a modern-day confederation is the British Commonwealth, in which several sovereign states combine around a few common institutions. Other examples of confederations are in the past: the United States of America before 1787, Switzerland before 1848 and Germany before 1866.

Those three confederations ended up as federations. It therefore seems appropriate for Europe to begin unification as a confederation before becoming a federation.

That method is dangerous. The changeover from a confederal to a federal system took place in Switzerland, as in Germany, only after separatist movements and civil wars (in 1848 and 1866). Only the British Confederation (i.e. the British Commonwealth) has survived, because its members are oceans apart.

Another warning from history must be borne in mind: in any confederation, sooner or later, the strongest nation will dominate the others. This was the case when Athens organised a confederation to defend Greece from the Persians. Later, Holland dominated the Dutch Confederation, the canton of Berne the Swiss Confederation, and Austria the German Confederation. Nowadays, no one would deny the dominant role played by Great Britain in the British Commonwealth.

The only way to prevent the strongest country ultimately dominating a confederation is to change it into a federation, because federations are formed by citizens, confederations by nation states. Thus the problem of dominance does not exist in a federation, unless it is written into the Constitution itself, as in the German Constitution in 1871, which was based on Prussian hegemony.

In all other federations, there is no question of dominance. In the United States of America, the most important State, New York, has no power over the other States. In Switzerland, the dominance of the canton of Berne disappeared once the federal constitution was adopted. In Germany, the largest State, North Rhine-Westphalia, makes no attempt to wield power over the other States. Finally, in the Soviet Union, it is not an inhabitant of Greater Russia that dominates the Federation, but a native of the small nation of Georgia.

Before deciding whether the union of European countries should take the form of a federation or a confederation, the statesmen of the countries involved should think hard and bear those historical experiments in mind.

They must realise that any confederal system runs two risks: separatism and domination. Only a European federation can protect us from both these dangers.

For it is likely that, one day, Russia will entice Germany away from Europe by allowing the two Germanies to reunite and by completely redrawing the Oder-Neisse border. A sovereign Germany with a national army would be more likely to accept this offer and leave a European confederation than a country solidly implanted in a federal system.

Another possible consequence of a confederation would be the dominance of Germany. Sooner or later, Germany, the most dynamic power on the Continent, would exercise overwhelming influence; in a federal system, however, its economic strengths would have only a favourable impact on an integrated Europe.

In order to avoid the dual problem of separatism and dominance, Europe should, from the outset, follow the example of the Swiss: transform itself as quickly as possible into a free and prosperous, stable and peaceful federation. Then there would be no risk of dominance, separatism or civil war.