

DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

by Larry Siedentop. Penguin, 2000. xii + 234 (incl. index). 234pp. ISBN 0 713 99402 9

Reviewer: Mark Thomas*

Development of the European Union (EU) has inspired more clichés and caricatures than polemics. Larry Siedentop, a lecturer in political thought at Oxford University, has now sought — zealously, passionately but thoughtfully — to redress that balance.

Since Siedentop is English, his analysis of the EU could easily be misconstrued as another disgruntled contribution to the ‘little England’, mad cow, ‘Brussels sausage’, budget rebates, ‘save the pound’ style of London tabloid complaint about the alleged risks and costs of British association with the Union. All the sorry contortions and permutations in that debate during the past few decades have been chronicled recently (and splendidly) by Hugo Young. Siedentop, though, is not at all a xenophobe or little Englander. He may be suspicious, resentful and anxious about some foreigners (senior French officials and their model of the state specifically), but tries hard to document the basis for his discontents.

Democracy in Europe is intended to comprise ‘a book of reflections, and, I hope, provocations to argument’. Rather than add to the British debate on Europe, in its current form, Siedentop proposes an entirely new form of — more informed, more thorough, more philosophically grounded — debate. He advocates a ‘great’ constitutional debate, one designed ‘to establish the goals of European political integration, the limits which such integration ought to respect, and the means by which new powers and institutions can be made accountable’.

Eurocrats, as well as elected European leaders, may respond that such a debate is a work in progress, advancing incrementally as the Union develops in stages, refined and elaborated as the EU’s ‘broadening and deepening’ proceeds, endorsed by the public at elections and in referenda, hammered out in political arbitrage, with the results then embodied in treaties, conventions and regulations. With the EU, perhaps, you make it (ever closer union) by doing it, as well as learning it (integration, that is) by doing it.

Siedentop’s rebuttal, and this is the core of his argument, would be that centralisation and uniformity should have aroused — at the very least — a more sceptical response from the European ‘political class’ and the publics they represent. Over-rated economics becomes Siedentop’s principal target. His essential premise is the notion that ‘in Europe, the language of economics has driven out the language of politics/constitutionalism’. At a more strident pitch, he would claim that ‘economists have become the witch-doctors of the modern world — performing rites and intoning formulas’.

The point of assailing ‘economism’ is to suggest, in practice, that EU centralisation and uniformity may not actually suit citizens’ interests. Or, in Siedentop’s more emphatic and exaggerated prose, ‘uniformity can easily become a kind of God, worshipped in its right’. As for centralisation, that might connote authoritarianism and rule by strangers (a phrase borrowed from Montesquieu), with the net effect perhaps being ‘to make a Europe safe for bureaucrats’.

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This intensely felt argument rests on a set of foundations, some more solid - in the sense of cogent, well-read, persuasive and coherent — than others. Take the foundation in history. Siedentop argues that ‘the process of state formation was, especially on the continent, essentially a despotic one’. Leaving aside the dated Anglo-centrism in his reference to ‘the continent’, Siedentop’s short-hand might well arouse the ire of the French, the Italians, the Portuguese and the Greeks, to name a few. Similarly, he claims that Beethoven’s change of heart on Napoleon (after he composed the ‘Eroica’ symphony) ‘symbolises the volte face of a whole generation of continental Europeans’. I wonder what sort of tangible evidence could be accumulated in support of that proposition.

Moving on to contemporary judgments, Siedentop argues that the ‘younger generation’ were celebrating their own confusion in their expression of feelings for Princess Diana. He claims, starkly but a bit too simply, that ‘the moral identity of Europe has become problematic’.

The much greater strength of *Democracy in Europe* lies in Siedentop’s capacity to apply philosophical precepts to political action. He does so in a consistently challenging way; this is where the provocations to argument really cut in. Siedentop suggests, for instance, that Brussels should impose only minimal standards, ‘not going beyond basic intuitions of justice’. Well, what might they be? how would a consensus on their form and connotations be agreed? which European states would start that debate from agreed premises and shared values?

I suggest that Siedentop would be well-equipped to lead a debate on that matter, as he would on his contention that power is often ceded to a political class ‘which has emerged in a morally acceptable way’. Here again, how would the claims of talent, education, wealth, heritage, ambition, clout and leverage be balanced one against another? Is it true, as Siedentop muses elsewhere, that a shared language is an indispensable civic bond for a working federation? Are the Belgians and the Swiss quite on the wrong track there?

Democracy in Europe contains plenty of practical recommendations as well: for a European Senate staffed by leading national politicians; for greater regional autonomy; for expanded engagement of lawyers in the political process, through creation of an adjudicating Supreme Court. The heart of the book, though, is still the philosophical tenets and Siedentop’s serious, dogged attempt to apply them to political action.

Siedentop’s book also contains a long (much too long) complaint about the way in which, as he sees it, the French model of the state is winning out (over British and American variants) as the form of a united Europe. This French win (perceived here as a response to German re-unification) is depicted as a victory for centralised authority, which ‘whatever its name — resembles nothing so much as the unitary French state’. In Siedentop’s analysis, ‘the French have to give more to Europe than any other country, because they believe in Europe as a moral and cultural undertaking’.

In Siedentop’s cosmology, the French know what they want and how to get it. They are clever, focused, deft, well-trained, determined and consistent. It is their ideas of the state (at home) and federalism (in Europe) about which he has reservations. This approach may over-estimate the extent, and the duration, of French power within the EU. It may over-simplify the reasons for that period of power. It may, conversely,

under-state the influence not only of the Germans but of the Spanish and Italians. Flaws in political analysis do not, however, invalidate the great strength of *Democracy in Europe*, the attempt not so much to condemn current French thinkers as to exhume much older ones (de Tocqueville and Montesquieu particularly) and apply their thinking to the problems of Europe today. ▲