

# Five minutes with Guy Verhofstadt, President of the ALDE Group and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Co-President of the Greens/European Free Alliance – “There is no alternative to a federal Europe”

by Blog Admin

In their new book, *‘For Europe’*, [Guy Verhofstadt](#) and [Daniel Cohn-Bendit](#) outline a manifesto for the creation of a fully federal Europe, complete with a new European constitution. In an interview with *EUROPP* editors Chris Gilson and Stuart A Brown, they discuss their manifesto, arguing that the current eurozone crisis leaves EU Member States with no alternative but to pursue closer integration.



**Many commentators speak of a ‘democratic deficit’ in the EU today. Do you think that this is the case?**

If there is any ‘democratic deficit’ it exists in the Council – the most opaque of EU institutions where Member State representatives usually vote behind closed doors, rarely explain their decisions or justify them back home but are happy to let ‘Brussels’ take the blame in national media for unpopular or misunderstood initiatives, omitting to mention the key role they play in the decision-taking and back-room deals. The European Parliament is directly elected and no less legitimate than any national parliament. If anything, it is not taken seriously enough by voters or governments who underestimate its role and duty to scrutinise all legislation in full public view. There is scope for Member State parliaments to take more interest in what the EU is doing and in appreciating that a number of policy issues nowadays cannot be viewed solely through a national prism. The European Commissioners themselves are appointed by Member States and therefore lack the direct political legitimacy that comes from election, but they do not form the EU’s legislature but are the executive body, accountable to the Parliament and Council. The election of the President of the Commission from European party lists however could improve both voter turnout and legitimacy.



**Do you think that a federal Europe would help to solve the current crisis in the eurozone?**

Not only will it help, but there is no alternative. All other options have been exhausted over the past three years and to no avail. The intergovernmental approach, where unanimity rules, has been utterly discredited by the financial crisis and shown up the lacunae in current economic governance structures. There has been a slow and belated recognition that the EU needs to complete economic and monetary union by reinforcing the building blocks through the creation of a genuine banking and fiscal union, leading to full blown economic and political union. The response to the financial crisis needs to be a comprehensive one that encompasses both solidarity and the transfer of sovereignty if the eurozone is to hold together. This requires such elements as a common deposit guarantee fund, recapitalisation fund and the partial mutualisation of debt. Without them, the markets will continue to pick the eurozone apart piece by piece. Abandoning Greece to its own devices may be tempting but would be catastrophic for the credibility of the remaining members, undermining the very essence of a single currency zone underpinned by the collective economic and political will.

**Do you think that Europe’s citizens support the idea of a federal Europe?**

Many may not be aware of it as an option. For the moment the choice is the uncomfortable and unworkable status quo or dissolution of the current European Union and a return to an era of nationalism and inter-state rivalry. It is necessary to outline how a federal Europe might look in the future and then to persuade politicians and public opinion that it offers better prospects than the alternatives. Support for more fiscal

integration is popular in Germany if it means that all countries will play by the rules. Even Greeks remain overwhelmingly in favour of remaining inside the euro, despite all they have been through. Federalism used to be understood as a way to avoid war and a pragmatic solution to transnational issues such as trade and free movement. Latterly though the term has fallen into disrepute and been misrepresented by eurosceptics who equate it with centralisation. On the contrary, several states in Europe already have federal constitutional structures with competences spread over different levels of government. A federal Europe is simply an acknowledgement that in today's world there are now a number of policy areas which transcend the nation state.

**In your manifesto you call for a new EU constitution to be drafted after EP elections in 2014. After the experience of the Constitutional Treaty, why do you think this will be successful?**

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since the rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005 – not least a very severe financial and economic crisis which has exposed the interdependence of Member States and their banking systems and the inadequacy of having a common monetary policy without a common fiscal policy. The mistake of the Constitutional Treaty was to bundle together all existing treaties into a single document and call it a Constitution. Rather, the next European Parliament to be elected in 2014 should become a Constituent Assembly whose chief responsibility would be to draw up a draft Constitution, in agreement with the Council of Ministers. The text should be short and concise and confine itself to genuinely constitutional aspects of EU governance and be submitted to a referendum across all countries of the Union. Individual States can then also hold separate referendums to determine if they wish to be part of the envisaged federal Europe. That is not only democratic but would generate far greater public participation in the elections as well as forcing all countries to confront the issue of Europe head on and no longer hide in the shadows.

**You say that: “Any states that reject the constitution will then have to decide, by referendum, whether they wish to remain in this new federal Europe or withdraw from it”. Do you think that all (by then) 28 members states will agree to remain in this new federal Europe, and if not, will this lead to a Europe of two speeds?**

We already effectively have a Union of two speeds between those inside the eurozone and those not, between those inside Schengen and those not, between those participating in Justice and Home Affairs cooperation and those not. The important thing is to ensure that no-one is excluded from participating in a tighter-knit federal Europe. Some countries may wish to forge ahead faster, as in the past, but the door should remain open to others to catch up when they are ready.

**In your proposals for a federal Europe, what policies do you see remaining with member states and what will be transferred to the European level?**

In any federal structure, the division of powers must be decided by the constituent parts of the federation in accordance with the times, pressures and demands of society. As things stand at present there is a clear need for a federal fiscal union within the eurozone to supervise cross-border banks, keep a check on national budgetary imbalances etc. Such a degree of integration would have been inconceivable even five years ago. Future external threats and budgetary strictures may force Member States to deepen defence cooperation or create a European version of the FBI for pursuing cross-border criminals. There needs to be much closer coordination and convergence of tax and social security policies too, but just like in the US, Germany or Spain there is scope for regional differences.

**Fast forward to 2022. If your proposals for a federal Europe are successful, how will the way that the European Union operates differ from today?**

The EU would be a much more cohesive unit, decision-making would be more efficient and transparent. There would be a clearer vision and sense of common purpose and endeavour. There may be a fast and a slow lane but there would not be the constant friction that results today from the use of unanimity rule to block important decisions like a single European patent or a single banking supervisor or a federal budget that matched the policy ambitions expected of it. The world of 2022 will likely be dominated by the BRIC

countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China). Even the current G8 may have been transformed by the emergence of new, more dynamic economies. The nation states of Europe, as formed in the 19th century, will no longer be able to compete or hold their own on a global level, so we have to begin to envisage new paradigms and plan for the brave new world of the future.

*Guy Verhofstadt and Daniel Cohn-Bendit will be speaking at the 'Manifesto for a post-national and federal Europe' event at the LSE on Monday 8 October, 2012.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the authors

### **Daniel Cohn-Bendit** – *Co-president of the European Greens–European Free Alliance*

Daniel Cohn-Bendit was elected as a Member of the European Parliament for the first time in 1994 on a German conscription list. Since 2002, he has been co-chairman of the group of the Greens/European Free Alliance. He won his current mandate as head of the list in Ile-de-France / Paris. Daniel holds an honorary doctorate from the Catholic University of Tilburg, Netherlands. He won the Hannah Arendt prize for Political Thinking, and the Trombinoscope award “Political Personality” for special contributions in the field of politics (2009).



### **Guy Verhofstadt** - *Leader of the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe*

Guy Verhofstadt has held a number of high profile posts in Belgium including Political Secretary to Willy De Clercq, National President of the Party for Freedom and Progress (PVV), an MP in the House of Representatives, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for the Budget, a Senator, and National President of the PVV and National President of the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (VLD). In 1999 he became Prime Minister of Belgium, heading three separate governments over the course of nearly ten years. In 2009 Guy he was elected to the European Parliament where he will pursue his interests in European politics after winning the unanimous support of the ALDE Group in their leadership contest. In addition to his duties as a politician, Guy has written a number of books including, *The New Age of Empires* (2008) and *Emerging from the Crisis: How Europe can Save the World* (2009).

