

French commitments to EU called into question

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Sir, Nicolas Sarkozy's role, alongside Angela Merkel, in accelerating the negotiations of the Lisbon treaty, as well as the dynamism of Jean-Pierre Jouyet, France's secretary of state for European affairs, are signs of a new departure.

However, Henri Guaino's remarks ("French seek pragmatic EU" and "Paris favours free will over Brussels dogma", December 10 [voir ci-dessous]) are worrying and in seeming contradiction with the efforts made thus far. While there is always room for improvement by the European Union, there are many in France who do not see the rationale for a shift in European politics or a re-nationalisation of the EU institutions that have served us well.

First and foremost, without respect for the rule of law there would be no EU. By deploring these "general, impersonal, automatic rules which have been fixed in advance", by calling for institutions that "should become more pragmatic and flexible to reflect changing circumstances and shifts in public opinion", Mr Guaino effectively pleads for the unravelling of the EU. How could a more heterogeneous Union of 27 states function without clear rules ? Which public opinion, national or European, would inspire these "more flexible" rules ? And at what cost for the single market and the common policies ? Ironically, the common agricultural policy would be the first victim of Mr Guaino's proposal.

Second, the EU is not running on autopilot. Each treaty was approved by national parliaments or by referendum. The French people voted on the Maastricht treaty creating the euro and enshrining the independence of the European Central Bank. Regulations and directives are adopted by national ministers and by directly elected MEPs. Mr Guaino contests the delegation of competences to independent authorities. It is worth remembering that two great democracies, the UK and the US, have both chosen to have independent central banks.

Furthermore, it is not feasible to expect "national politicians to exercise more influence" over state aids and mergers. European competition authorities are respected worldwide and are far from being considered naive by the likes of Bill Gates and Jack Welch. Only independent authorities can act in the interest of the welfare of the EU as a whole.

Finally, the remarks by Mr Guaino call into question certain fundamental commitments, for example reduction of the public debt. Reducing public debt is not obeying a diktat decreed in Brussels ; it is honouring a promise made by France which is in its best interest.

France will be able to claim – rightly – it is "back in Europe" and exert influence when it sends credible and reliable messages on its legal and economic commitments to the EU.