

# ***FEDERALISMS - EAST AND WEST***

## ***INDIA, EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA***

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**OXFORD CONFERENCE STATEMENT: 28<sup>TH</sup>–30<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2010**

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### **Background**

This conference will take place against the background of a world in turmoil. The narrative of global power which has structured Western thinking for at least two centuries (and arguably since ancient Greece) has become dangerously misleading. That narrative posited a world divided between an enlightened, modern, rational and progressive ‘West’ and an unenlightened and backward ‘East’.

These assumptions were always patronising and misleading. They are now manifestly absurd. Today, India is by far the world’s largest democracy, while China is on course to become its biggest economy. The shattering global economic crisis of 2008-2009 was spawned in the supposedly rational West, not in the once-backward East. America’s recovery has been slow and halting; the future of the Euro is in doubt. Meanwhile, the failure of the Copenhagen climate change conference has shown that major global problems cannot be solved unless the West co-operates with the East on terms of equality.

The long-term shift of influence and power from West to East is a truism. Yet its implications for the political and economic governance of the world’s major power centres are far from clear. The Oxford conference cannot address all the issues involved: no single conference could. Instead we shall focus on three of the centres concerned – India, the European Union and the United States – while not forgetting that Canadian governance may have useful lessons for its larger neighbours to the south and across the Atlantic.

All four of the systems we shall be looking at are committed to pluralist democracy and the rule of law. Three of them – India, the United States and Canada – are also all federal states. The European Union is neither a federation nor a state. Nor, however, is it a loose-knit confederation of the sort that preceded the creation of the United States. It is *sui generis* – a highly original and often confusing blend of federal and confederal elements. The European Parliament and Court of Justice are essentially federal in role and inspiration; the European Council and the Council of Ministers are confederal. And whatever else it may be, the EU is undoubtedly a polity. It is governed according to rules derived from binding treaties, and interpreted by a supra-national court, reminiscent of the Supreme Courts of India and the United States.

Despite some unhappy episodes, Indian, American and Canadian federalisms have all been success stories. With a similar qualification, so has European quasi-federalism. But no divine law assures continued success. All four of the systems the Oxford conference will discuss face testing challenges – economic, political, cultural and even existential. As this troubled century moves on, the challenges are likely to become more testing, and the questions they provoke more pressing. These stand out:

- First, the ***challenge of adaptation***. The world is changing so fast that elites and publics find it ever-more difficult to keep pace. Old assumptions, dating from the days when the ‘West’ really did call the shots in global politics, die hard. So do the institutions, habits and procedures inherited from those days. In a fast moving world, the age-old tension between effective decision-making and pluralist governance is likely to become increasingly acute. That tension is an inescapable feature of fully-fledged federal systems, as President Obama is now finding out, and also of the quasi-federalism of the European Union, as the architects of the Lisbon Treaty discovered. *Can it be resolved? If so, how? Can the existing structures of multi-level governance in India, Europe, United States and Canada, and the attitudes they embody, provide answers to these critical questions?*
- Second, ***the challenge of identity***. The American constitution begins with the ringing words, ‘We, the people of the United States’. But who are the people? That question has reverberated through American history since the early years of the Republic, and still does. In different ways, it also a major theme of modern (or perhaps post-modern) politics in Canada, the European Union and India. The European Union’s motto, ‘united in diversity’, encapsulates one approach to it. *But how much diversity can a union accommodate without falling apart? And how far can the pursuit of unity go without stamping out diversity?*
- Third, the ***challenge of legitimacy***. In most of the modern world democracy, human rights and the rule of law are preconditions of legitimacy. Even regimes that flout them claim to embody them. The four systems our Conference will look at are all committed to them; and despite occasional blemishes they largely honour these commitments. But in a rapidly changing world, and in what may well be a cold economic climate, losers may well outnumber winners – and legitimacy may well be under threat as a result. *Can the systems we shall focus on meet that challenge? Can pluralist democracy and its cultural underpinnings withstand a cold climate?*

We believe that there is an urgent need for debate on these increasingly pressing issues. We see our conference as a contributor to such a debate.

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