Reinventing the European Dream

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Commenting on the Jubilee’s river pageant and horse parade, historian Simon Schama talked to the BBC about “little boats and big ideas.” The biggest idea was that Britain’s monarchy serves to connect the country’s past to its future in ways that transcend the pettiness and ugliness of quotidian politics. The heritage of kings and queens stretching back across more than a millennium – the enduring symbolism of crowns and coaches, and the literal embodiment of the English and now the British state – binds Britons together in a common journey.

Cynics might call this the old bread-and-circuses routine. But the point is to fix eyes and hearts on a narrative of hope and purpose – to uplift, rather than distract, the public. Are Greeks, Spaniards, Portuguese, and other Europeans really supposed to embrace an austerity program imposed on them because prevailing wisdom in Germany and other northern countries considers them profligate and lazy? Those are fighting words, creating resentment and division just when unity and burden-sharing are most needed.

Greece, in particular, now needs a way to connect its past with its future, but no monarch is forthcoming. And, as the cradle of the world’s first democracy, Greece needs other symbols of national renewal than scepters and robes. It is through Homer that virtually all Western readers first encounter the Mediterranean world: its islands and shores and peoples knit together by diplomacy, trade, marriage, oil, wine, and long ships. Greece could once again be a pillar of such a world, using its current crisis to craft a new future.

That vision is more plausible than one might think. Natural-gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean are estimated to hold up to 122 trillion cubic feet, enough to supply the entire world for a year. More gas and large oil fields lie off the Greek coast in the Aegean and Ionian Seas, enough to transform the finances of Greece and the entire region. Israel and Cyprus are planning joint exploration; Israel and Greece are discussing a pipeline; Turkey and Lebanon are prospecting; and Egypt is planning to license exploration.

But politics, as always, intervenes. All countries involved have maritime disputes and political disagreements. The Turks are working with Northern Cyprus, whose independence only they recognize, and regularly make threatening noises about Israel’s drilling with the Greek Cypriot government of the Republic of Cyprus. The Greek Cypriots regularly hold the EU hostage over any dealings with Turkey, as has Greece. The Turks will not let Cypriot ships into their harbors and have not been on speaking terms with the Israelis since nine Turkish citizens were killed on a ship that sought to breach Israel’s blockade of Gaza. Lebanon and Israel do not have diplomatic relations.

In short, the riches, jobs, and development that would flow to all countries in the region from responsible energy exploitation may well be blocked by the insistence of each on getting what it regards as its fair share and denying access to its enemies.
The vision of a Mediterranean Energy Community thus seems destined to remain a pipedream. Yet July will bring the 60th anniversary of the ratification of the Treaty of Paris, which established the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) among France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg only six years after the end of World War II. During the previous 70 years, Germany and France had fought each other in three devastating wars, the last two of which ruined Europe’s economies and decimated its population.

These countries’ mutual hatred and suspicion was no less bitter and deep-seated than that afflicting the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, with the assistance of his counselor Jean Monnet, announced a plan for the ECSC in 1950, only five years after German troops had left Paris, with the aim of making “war not only unthinkable but materially impossible.” Schuman proposed putting Franco-German coal and steel production under a common High Authority, thereby preventing the two sides from using the raw materials of war against each other, and powering a common industrial economy. The ECSC became the core of today’s European Union.

The EU today is on the ropes, but only a few concrete steps by European leaders might open the door to similarly bold diplomacy that could restore EU and Mediterranean economies and transform the energy politics of Europe and Asia. If the European Parliament and the European Council were to take steps to make direct EU trade with northern Cyprus subject to qualified majority voting rather than consensus (and hence veto by Cyprus), the EU would be able to begin trading with northern Cyprus, and Turkey could begin trading with Cyprus as a whole. These steps could lead in turn to a Turkish, Cypriot, and Greek energy partnership that would provide positive incentives for Turkish-Israeli reconciliation.

The Schuman Plan took two years to crystalize and a decade to implement. But it gave war-torn and desperately poor Europeans a positive vision of a new future, something that Greece and Cyprus, not to mention Middle Eastern and North African countries, desperately need. Europe’s leaders will not surmount this crisis by pounding their citizens with bleak demands for austerity. They must take concrete steps, with Greece as a full and equal partner, to create a vision of real rewards from a rejuvenated EU.

The EU does not have a Queen Elizabeth. What it needs is another Schuman and Monnet.