

Forced borrowing: the WMD of fiscal policy

**Jean-Paul Fitoussi,
Gabriele Galateri di
Genola and Philippe Weil**

A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of sovereign default. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Brussels and Frankfurt, Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy, French socialists and German Christian Democrats. Churchillian doctors, they prescribe blood, sweat and tears – fiscal consolidation, tax increases and spending cuts. They swear, for the umpteenth time, that they will never surrender: Greece will be saved, Italy and Spain will not be abandoned and the rating of France will not be downgraded. In the face of adversity, they assure us that what cannot be achieved by austerity can be achieved by more austerity. An epidemic of holier-than-thou fiscal virtue is spreading throughout Europe and is fast transforming a series of uncoordinated fiscal retrenchments into a euro-wide contraction with dire implications for growth and employment.

To be sure, eurozone policymakers are in a maddening situation. The threat to monetise public debt, which in the old days could be waved by

each country to remind investors it need not ever default outright, has been removed from national arsenals. No one knows for sure whether it will ever be brandished from Frankfurt or if European treaties even allow it. Eurobonds would have every economic merit but they hurt Germany which, having been left on its own to finance reunification, is understandably cold towards *die Transfer-Union*. Creating separate northern and southern euro areas would probably precipitate the end of the single market – and where would France fit? Wide-ranging fiscal reform designed to increase tax revenue equitably, while sorely needed, is a pipe dream: it requires elusive European co-ordination in an area in which the temptation to compete is strong and it is best done at its own pace – not under the pressure of fickle market sentiment or rising sovereign spreads.

Add to this powerlessness the terrifying failure of the old engine of European policymaking (putting the cart before the horse in the hope that the cart will conjure up the horse) and you will understand the ghoulish visions gripping our leaders. Monetary union has not begotten the expected fiscal union. Imposing, as a substitute, austerity plans from Brussels or Frankfurt, or racing to be first to impose “golden

rule” constitutional strictures on parliaments that should remain sovereign in fiscal matters is stoking the fire of civil unrest. The English Civil War and American Revolution were ignited by much less. It would be wise to recall, as John Hampden did in contesting the Ship Money tax levied by Charles I, that what leaders have no right to demand, a citizen has a right to refuse.

Yet Europe’s fate is not sealed. The spectre of sovereign default and rising spreads in Italy, Spain,

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Belgium and other countries can be chased away in one fell swoop and the panic of contractionary fiscal policies can be stopped. National governments must simply take out of their fiscal armoury the weapon that has served them so well in war and peace alike: forced borrowing.

It consists in coercing taxpayers to lend to their government. California did this in 2009 when it added a premium to the income tax withheld from paychecks, to be repaid the

following year. In France, the first Mitterand government forced rich taxpayers to fund a two-year bond issue – and both the US and UK have used moral suasion in patriotic sales of war bonds. Compulsory lending is an unconventional weapon but it is high time it be used, even on a small scale, to remind investors that sovereigns are not private borrowers: they need never default because they can always force-feed debt issues to their own residents.

Central banks have been bold and dared resort to unconventional policies to respond to the exceptional circumstances of this crisis. Large sovereign borrowers should be as defiant and intrepid. The invaluable asset of fiscal sovereignty guarantees that their public debt is completely risk-free in nominal terms. Investors who buy sovereign credit default swaps against the spectre of French or Italian default are wasting their money. Policymakers rushing to austerity should wake up from their nightmare and save growth and employment before it is too late.

Jean-Paul Fitoussi is former president and Philippe Weil is president of OFCE, the Observatoire français des conjonctures économiques in Paris. Gabriele Galateri di Genola is president of Generali. The views expressed are their own