

European Voice
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What Europe do we want: the message from below

Ironically, European heads of State are gathering today *in* Brussels to finally agree on the first European Constitution ever written, while a few days earlier European voters sent *to* Brussels an increasingly euro-sceptic bunch of MEPs - and more importantly, while a majority did not even bother to vote, delivering the lowest turnout ever for the European Parliament. What is the message of these elections then?

Clearly, the question is no longer whether our leaders can manage to stitch up a deal among themselves on the controversial clauses of the Constitution. The skills of the Irish presidency, political change in Poland and Spain and the relative humbling of the French and German governments make a positive outcome highly likely this time around. The question rather is whether they will come up with a text, a discourse and initiatives that can capture the imagination of enough stay-at-home voters to ensure a “Yes” in the round of national referenda necessary for its ratification. If adopting a Constitution for Europe is a two-level game, the game played at the intergovernmental table today will shape tomorrow’s domestic games. The Conventioneers did not manage to create a “Constitutional moment”. Will European leaders, citizens’ groups and political parties do better? For this to happen, at least three conditions must be fulfilled.

Denationalize European votes, be it for the Parliament or a Constitution. An old theme, but clearer than ever. European elections campaigns focused on national issues do not mobilise the mildly-pro-EU but demoralize European campaigners and provide ammunition to Eurosceptics. Conversely, a pan-European focus can pay, as testified by the score obtained by Cohn-Bendit’s Greens in most member states.

None more than Prodi has done more damage in this regard. By abandoning his responsibilities at the helm of the Commission in order to run in Italy, he has sent the worse possible signal to European voters. Sure, he gained points over Berlusconi – hence the conspiracy of silence surrounding his behaviour- but this is too high a price to pay for the EU. As he himself said yesterday, Europe’s political class should “look in the mirror” when trying to understand public hostility or apathy towards the EU.

Renationalize the European Constitution. Even voters inclined to support the European project are often wary of the Constitution’s impact. They are still afraid of “creeping competences” and want a more *effective* Europe (in foreign or social policy) but not *more* Europe. Yet they will find no provision in this Constitution for the repatriation of specific policies to the state level –the classic federal cycles- but instead a badly written article on pre-emption which gives the (wrong) impression that EU action kicks national governments out. We must not leave the praise of the local and the recognition of the importance of national belonging to euro-sceptics. The Constitution must convey that the EU is not becoming a “country” but the institutional base for a flourishing European “demos-cracy.”

European policies are not meant to replace local actors but to empower them. In this spirit, the Summiteers should heed the call of Delors, Geremek and other signatories for the inclusion of five flagships for social Europe in the Constitution.

The EU should also be about shared leadership. Voters from smaller member states and new members are afraid that their countries will fall prey to the hegemonic temptations of big states. Yet, the Constitution fails to reinstate rotating summits, which, in spite of their unruly nature, have been the best symbolic testimonies that EU policy is not “made in Brussels” but in a decentralized fashion everywhere in Europe from Copenhagen to Lisbon. The Constitution and its preamble can still be revised to be more citizen-friendly and inspiring. *

Transnationalize European debate. Nevertheless, however imperfect the Constitutional baby produced by our leaders on Sunday, those who believe in the European idea must mobilise in the next phase. As Tom Bentley and Paul Hilder write in the recent *Democratic Papers*, there may be no single bullet for the EU’s legitimacy crisis but Europe is bursting with democratic futures. The upcoming Constitutional debate must be seen as part of a process of evolutionary democracy in Europe. The Constitution will introduce more democratic controls – from the new citizens’ initiative to national parliamentary control over subsidiarity- that must be exploited, but should also spin-off new initiatives.

Why not institutionalise EU-level e-voting so successfully introduced by the Greek Presidency? Why not plan a real transnational “European agora” before the national referenda, a Woodstock of European politics open to all during the Spring of 2005? European citizens (a notion that must include all of its residents) must be offered and invent more channels of direct and deliberative participation in what is after all one of the most ambitious peace project of all times.

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* * See proposals in ‘*Making it Our Own: A Trans-European proposal on Amending the draft Constitutional Treaty for the European Union*’. (<http://www.fedtrust.co.uk/>)