

[Comment] Lessons for Europe from the British referendum

RICHARD LAMING

Today @ 09:18 CET

EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The dust is now settling after the referendum in the UK earlier this month on changing the electoral system. The result, on a 41 percent turnout, was 68 percent in favour of keeping the existing system, and only 32 percent in favour of change. This is only second national referendum in British history, and there are lessons for everybody, both in the UK and in the rest of Europe.

The first lesson is for advocates of direct democracy: be careful what you wish for. It may seem a good idea that changes to the political system, such as the means by which we elect MPs, should be endorsed by the citizens rather than simply left to the MPs themselves. A referendum serves as a check on the political class. But does it?

The campaign in Britain was very poor, with little focus on the issue that was actually on the ballot paper and most debate about other issues altogether. There were various reasons for this.



"Referendums sound better in theory than they do in practice"
(Photo: Steve Rhodes)

First, the proposed change was quite complicated and technical, from First Past The Post to the Alternative Vote (if you must know), which not many people understood and even fewer understood properly. Claims and counterclaims were flung by both sides about the two systems that bore little relation to the truth.

Secondly, the state of the economy has left many voters more interested in using their votes to punish political parties rather than change the voting system. Who did supporters of the opposition Labour party prefer to hurt: Conservative prime minister David Cameron (supporting a No vote), or Nick Clegg, leader of the junior coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats (advocating Yes)? Nick Clegg, as it turned out.

And thirdly, and perhaps above all, the issue on the table was not the one that people really wanted to discuss. The idea of holding a referendum was born in the coalition

negotiations between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats after the general election last year, but the Conservatives could not agree to a vote on the Liberal Democrats' preferred STV system, the one used in Ireland. Instead, they settled on the AV system, along the lines used in Australia. This was a compromise between the two parties, and everybody knew it. Splits and divisions within the two sides in the referendum became as much a part of the story as the splits and divisions between them.

With all this confused background, it is hardly surprising that the debate was low quality and the turnout small. The result was a decisive No, although campaigners for a Yes vote can tell each other quietly that their arguments in favour were never really tested. This is a bad result for British politics.

And it is a lesson for Europe. Think about those recent referendums on the constitutional treaty or the Lisbon treaty. All of those three reasons I have listed above applied then, too. Voter confusion, the intrusion of personalities, and an unsatisfactory compromise all sound familiar, don't they? Referendums sound better in theory than they do in practice.

A second lesson lies in the result itself. As I said, it was a decisive No to change, in favour of keeping the system that has been used more or less since parliament was first established and elections first held. The science of electoral systems has been studied thoroughly and the inadequacy of the British system for a modern multi-party democracy has been well-established. But, basking in the glow of the royal wedding, the British voters preferred medieval romanticism to scientific modernity.

This is also a lesson for Europe. The UK government is writing into law the requirement that any future changes to the European Union treaties that pool more sovereignty within the EU must be approved by the British people in a referendum. This applies to significant steps such as joining the euro or the Schengen area, and also to small ones such as changing the decision-making procedure relating to the operational cooperation between the customs authorities of the member states.

Imagine trying to win such a referendum in a country where the people want an irrational and unfair electoral system. Future development of the European Union has suddenly become a lot more difficult, thanks to the evident British attachment to the ways of the 19th century. A lesson for us all, and a problem for Europe. Sorry.

The writer is chair of Federal Union