

[Comment] Nothing wrong with cherry-picking

09.06.2005 - 09:49 CET | By Richard Laming

EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The failure of the two referendums in France and the Netherlands may have left pro-European campaigners with *oeuf* and *ei* on their faces, but they have been proved right about one thing at least.

The consequences of a Yes vote were clear, they said. The move towards a democratic European Union continues. And if there is a No vote, chaos follows. Nobody has a clue what happens next.

The Yes campaign's predictions of victory may have been awry, but they were right about the aftermath of failure. No-one knows what to do now. The summit meeting next week will have to try to pick up the pieces. Can the ratification process continue? Can the Irish and the Poles hold their referendums? Must the British do the same?

In the face of all this uncertainty, let me make a concrete suggestion. Let's take some good things from the European constitution and make them happen anyway.

There are several parts of the proposal that would improve the standard of democracy within the European institutions. They would make them more effective and accountable. And, crucially, they do not need a change in the treaties. A simple summit could agree these things.

Meeting in public

First, the Council of Ministers could meet in public when dealing with legislation. (This doesn't even need a summit – a single national government could simply leak all the papers and broadcast the proceedings from the Council chamber on a mobile phone.) Who could object to this? Every government has already signed up. Even the French and Dutch electorate, I suspect, would accept this one.

Next, the European Council could choose itself a chair. The heads of government meet in secret and publish no minutes, so they might even have chosen somebody already and not told anyone. If they had, we couldn't find out. Choosing a chair doesn't require a treaty change, only a decision by the people at the meeting itself.

Thirdly, national parliaments should be consulted on legislation. Open Council meetings will make this possible, in any case, for those national parliaments that choose to stir themselves, but the Commission could invite comments from them on the immediate publication of the first legislative proposal.

And lastly, the heads of government should make it clear that the next president of the Commission will be appointed on the strength of the results of the next European elections in 2009. That will concentrate minds. Want to get ahead in European politics? Then earn the right at the ballot box.

Something supporters and opponents can agree on

I can hear the counter-argument already that it shouldn't be for heads of government to take such far-reaching decisions on their own. The nature of European politics ought to be harder to shift than this. The closed doors at summits should not conceal changes to our democracy.

My response is that at last there is something that both supporters and opponents of further European integration can agree on. Of course, such powers should not lie in so few hands. That's the whole point of a European constitution.

It is the recognition in black and white that the peoples of Europe share a common political space and need democratic rules in order to make sense of it.

The collective decisions taken by the different countries together are political and not diplomatic, and that the citizens should have a say. This debate shows that the case could not be clearer, even if right now the prospect is a little more distant than I would like.

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Printed from EUobserver.com 09.06.2005

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