

[Comment] How the EU can communicate better

04.10.2006 - 07:56 CET | By Richard Laming

EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The European Commission's consultation on its communication policy is a landmark event. No longer can the Commission be accused of being a remote, isolate bureaucracy.

Its consultation was seeking opinions on how it should engage with the wider European public. It was even consulting on how it should consult with the wider European public. Now, that might amount to too much concern for what the public thinks, but it certainly ends any suggestion that it has too little.

As long, that is, as it learns the lessons and makes the necessary changes. And there are some changes needed.

French nobleman Duc de la Rochefoucauld famously observed that "The world rewards the appearance of merit more often than merit itself." If was true in the 17th century court of Louis XIV, it remains true today. La Rochefoucauld was concerned about the opinions of the Sun King; the EU is concerned about the opinions of the Sun newspaper.

In thinking about how the EU should change, it is worth dealing with these two aspects, merit and the appearance of merit, separately.

When it comes to merit, it is always going to be hard for the EU to win support as long as its institutions remain less democratic than those of the member states. If law can be made and money spent without needing the approval of the European Parliament, who can be surprised if the public remains cynical? Fixing the democratic problem will take some years, but it is a priority task. Reviving and completing the constitutional process is a must.

But there are some immediate things to be done, though, that will start to make a difference in the battle for public opinion right away.

For example, the Council of Ministers should follow the same kind of rules on openness as the European Parliament when dealing with legislation. There have been some improvements in openness made by recent presidencies but there are still plenty of ways in which national government ministers can keep on taking legislative decisions behind closed doors. A change like this would not require any change to the treaties, only to the Council's own rules of procedure, and could be done tomorrow.

Secondly, the European Commission should think more carefully about the policies it promotes and the way it promotes them. A great many EU activities take place behind the scenes: if the public can't really see them, it is not surprising that they do not value them. A highly visible policy like ERASMUS brings a benefit which people see and value. The Commission should look for more policies of the ERASMUS type.

Furthermore, the Commission needs to cut out the needless hostages to fortune in its public pronouncements. A proposal on maritime safety last year, for example, included the statement that harmonised standards at sea would also be required if the EU were to have its own maritime flag. True, but irrelevant. There is no plan to have a single EU maritime registration: all that statement did was provoke hostility to the new EU policy on safety.

Next, the EU institutions need to find allies. The most convincing advocates of anything are the people you know who have experienced the benefits personally. It's true of new products, it's true of holiday destinations, it's true of the EU. Individual citizens, businesses and

associations should be encouraged to speak out about what they know, on both the good and the bad.

Lastly, the EU needs to bridge the gap that separates it from the national level. It needs to integrate better with national communications policies. The member state governments themselves depend on a successful and popular European Union, so it is in their interest too that the European message is understood.

It won't be a quick task to turn round the supertanker of public attitudes towards the European Union. But if the people of Europe are to get full benefit from their unique and pioneering approach to international cooperation, there is no alternative. The time to start is now.

The author is director of Federal Union

© EUobserver.com 2006

Printed from EUobserver.com 04.10.2006

The information may be used for personal and non-commercial use only.

This article and related links can be found at: <http://euobserver.com/7/22546>