

FOREWORD

by Julian Priestley

Extract from:

Salvatore Signorelli, "The EU and public opinions:
a love-hate relationship?", *Studies and Reports No 93*,
Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2012.

Opinion polling is now a standard tool of governance almost everywhere. Although the institutions of the European Union had been behind the curve compared with Member States, the problems of legitimacy, compounded by the complexity of communicating in a Union of 27 Member States, has prompted first the Commission and then the Parliament, to use polling as a routine part of policy formation, both up- and downstream of decision-making—a means of both informing public opinion and being informed by it. With time the sophistication of the techniques employed and the range of tools available have been developed almost beyond recognition.

The instrument of choice has been Eurobarometer, and in this study for *Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, Salvatore Signorelli, a political scientist tells the history of European public opinion polling, including a fascinating vignette of the original promoters of the project. His experience in both the Commission and the European Parliament's 'Public Opinion Monitoring Unit' enables him to tell the story in full how the institutions came to embrace these methods.

For the history of the Union's relationship with public opinion has been a tortuous one, from the functionalist approach of the 1950s which kept citizens at arm's length from policy making almost as a matter of principle, to the Commission's 'plan D for democracy' in 2005, a near panic reaction to the upsets of the French and Dutch referendums on the constitutional treaty, which sought to address the problem of the information deficit and which sanctified the use of polling by Commission departments as an everyday accompaniment to their policy work. When one reads the lists produced by the author of policies which have gone through the mill of deliberative polling, opinion surveys, structured interviewing and focus groups one can only marvel at the scale and scope of the consultative exercise. And these policy based exercises are in addition to the annual reports on the state of public opinion, on general

attitudes to European construction, and on citizen's views about future perspectives. Signorelli cites the extraordinary Eurobarometer data base, accumulated over 38 years, of 150 annual reports with the involvement of 300,000 citizens.

So if the esteem in which the Union is held is in continuous decline, if fewer and fewer people reply positively to the question whether their country benefits from its membership of the Union, and if its institutions enjoy less trust, this is not for want of information about public attitudes, expectations and opinions. It is not to underestimate the potential usefulness of polling to say that the Union's problems of acceptance and legitimacy may well lie elsewhere.

The first problem identified forty years ago remains. The institutions of the Union are now better informed about the concerns of citizens but the citizens remain poorly informed about the Union. This is not for want of effort by the Commission, by its representations in Member States, by the Parliament with its vastly expanded communication activities and the efforts of its members. The Parliament is rightly proud of its exploitation of the new social media, and its burgeoning presence on internet in a variety of forms. But until a quality debate about choices for Europe's future takes centre stage throughout the Union not just episodically when referendums are organised or during the different instalments of the latest phase of the economic crisis but systematically day in and day out, then the information deficit will remain and the full potential of regular consultation and monitoring of public opinion will not be realised.

And here, in the absence of a truly European media, and with European public opinion remaining a concept that is at best only partly formed those that should be the protagonists in that permanent debate about European questions – the political parties – have their full part to play. And the occasion best suited to the widest consultation of all of public opinion is of course the election to the European Parliament, the definitive opinion poll, but one which needs to be the culmination of protracted and informed debate about the main issues and policies of European integration.

For there is a danger with excessive recourse to opinion polling. It is as Jacques Delors (cited by Signorelli) pointed out the risk that 'Public opinion polls

dictate policy'. Of course political leaders should have every information about the views of citizens, their attitudes to policies, their prejudices and expectations, but then the politicians not the focus groups should be the ones to decide. To subcontract decision-making to opinion polls would be the ultimate betrayal of the trust and responsibility of the political class.

At a time when Europe requires courageous leadership above all else, the moment calls for leaders to listen to public opinion, to possess accurate analysis of the views and expectations of citizens, but then to take the decisions in the general and long term interest, all the while explaining and informing tirelessly. Building Europe – which because it requires the pursuit of the long-term and the general interest was always going to be ‘a hard sell’ for the general public compared with facile euroscepticism – requires open, receptive and transparent leadership but it is the quality of the leadership itself which is indispensable.

Sir Julian Priestley was Secretary General of the European Parliament from 1997 to 2007. He now writes and speaks about European questions. His latest book Europe's Parliament; People, Places and Politics (co-authored with Stephen Clark and with a preface by Jacques Delors) was published this year by John Harper Publishing.