

Rudderless Europe need not run aground

By Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul and Stephen Boucher

European Voice, 02/06/2005

What does the French 'Non' mean? The message behind the slap in the face to EU construction given by the French 'Non' is not homogenous. Yet it is strong, and requires unambiguous and vigorous action. In the medium term, the process of ratification should be continued and a European Council convened, as dictated by the Treaty, in November 2006 to assess whether a four-fifths majority has been reached and what course to take. But what should the European Commission do in the short term and what lessons can we learn on referenda for the long term?

While a close look at results indicates that the epicentre of the French 'political earthquake' lies mostly in suburban and rural France, it is the Berlaymont building and the Commission in Brussels which felt the first shockwave. French 'Non-ists' have been keen in the past few weeks to do the usual Commission bashing. The 'Oui' camp has failed to convince French citizens that the Commission is a formidable innovation in the history of transnational governance, that it is a tool uniquely designed to promote Europe's general interest. Without sharing the somewhat inflated view of France's ability to give guidance to the EU, it is still true the French vote could have a paralysing effect on the EU executive and its civil servants may in effect be left largely rudderless. Two key reasons were cited by French voters to explain their rejection of the treaty on Sunday 29 May: protest over "bad economic and social conditions" and concern over "France's loss of leadership in Europe and the world". While the first was mainly directed at the French executive, both messages can paradoxically be heard as an encouragement to the Commission. Indeed, they are not a blanket rejection of European construction. The first mistake would therefore be for the Commission to stall in its efforts to build a stronger Union. Renewed impetus at the top of the Commission should encourage EU civil servants to help deliver the types of policies which European citizens expect to stimulate growth, employment, and Europe's role in the world. Another mistake would be to change course. It is essential that each member state make its own decision. The people around Europe should have a right to debate the treaty. Governments and EU institutions alike need to ensure that every single member state fulfils the ratification process. For the solution to the difficulties raised by France's consultation will be European, not French alone. In the long term, a third mistake would be to conclude that the treaty should have been ratified through the national parliament, where it would easily have exceeded the required three-fifths majority, and that referendums are to be shunned. Many officials, in Paris, Brussels and other EU capitals will surely argue that it is impossible to separate the question from the questioner in popular consultations. But should EU matters from now on be left only to experts who can master the complexities of EU decision-making?

Indian Nobel prize-winner Amartya Sen once said that a country does not need to be fit for democracy: it becomes fit through democracy. The recent French campaign and past experience show that at least two steps should be taken to "democratise democracy" at the national and EU level.

First, debates on European issues should be a permanent part of national politics and any significant public consultation should be prepared thoroughly. While the French debate was very intense, many French voters also felt confused. Because of this confusion, the status quo appeared to many as a safer option than a new treaty. The answer could be in participatory democracy: innovative and citizen-friendly tools of consultation and deliberation, preferably transnational, which can make the EU public space more visible to citizens, provided they are based on rigorous methodologies that truly give citizens a voice. Second, future citizen decisions on EU constitutional affairs should be organised throughout the EU over the same week, like European Parliamentary elections today, until Europe is ready for EU-wide referendums. Only then will preparatory campaigns have a better chance of focusing on the EU rather than national political calculations. The European executive will have an important role to play in the matters raised here. As such, the French 'Non' must encourage the Commission to be bold.

- *Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul is secretary-general and Stephen Boucher a consultant at the EU think-tank Notre Europe, founded by Jacques Delors and chaired by Pascal Lamy.*