

# Engaging citizens in the debate about the EU constitution

By Stephen Boucher, Jean-Yves Le Deaut and Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul

European Voice, 13/01/2005

**"And you, are you for or against the European constitution?" It is easy to imagine how many voters will find it difficult to answer this question in the coming months, whether at the pub or in the voting booth. Referenda on the constitutional treaty are nevertheless scheduled in nearly half of the EU member states and, at a time when the treaty is the focus of intense political battles, it is likely that national debates will be contaminated by local electoral considerations.**

Bombarded with opinions, most citizens will remain bewildered by the complexity of the issue. It is essential that European voters be provided with adequate means to make a well-informed choice, especially considering the importance of the revision of the institutional framework for the enlarged EU and the opportunity such referenda represent for the construction of a democratic Union. In France, the Socialist Party has initiated an early debate, which has provided French citizens with a wide range of arguments. This is a useful role, which politicians and the media can and should play around the EU. But is it sufficient to ensure that the debates will reflect more than the latest media soundbites, or the relative effectiveness of different parties in publicising their point of view? Will EU voters have the time to read the constitution, to listen to a balanced and wide range of opinions, and to share views with citizens from other member states?

There is in fact a tool in politicians' toolkits that has been little used to date: consensus conferences. Initiated in Denmark, they have later been applied with success in other countries, although never on a European scale. If organized in key member states, preferably by civil society organisations, such conferences could provide an innovative solution to the knowledge and democratic deficit, which the referenda on the constitution risk generating. Consensus conferences are a rigorous process designed to elicit the views of ordinary citizens on complex policy matters. They usually bring together around 15 voluntary men and women independent of political parties and from various social backgrounds. By adhering to a strict methodology, they provide the participants with a range of opinions and facts as wide and objective as possible. Participants are allowed to invite any additional expert they wish to hear. Since such conferences are organised on weekends over several weeks, the participants are given ample time to reflect. Consensus conferences thereby allow an in-depth debate on complex issues that have far-reaching consequences for society, and where the terms of the debate are too often monopolised and simplified by experts linked to interest groups and political parties. The use of genetically modified products is a typical example of an issue where consensus conferences have proved valuable, for instance in Denmark, the UK and France. Past experience demonstrates that consensus conferences generate significant media interest, because of the truly participatory and innovative nature of the process. They therefore have an impact far beyond the participants involved.

Although several such conferences have been successfully organised at a national level, the simultaneous organisation of such conferences in several member states would be an absolute first and an effective way of promoting EU democracy. It would help involve citizens meaningfully, further boost public interest and generate a debate beyond national borders and party political agendas, on an issue which voters are eager to grasp. It could potentially "bring the EU closer to its citizens".

Experience shows, however, that consensus conferences can only fulfil such promises if the organisers are serious about the process. Great amounts of time, care and resources are needed to give the participants the means to reach a useful opinion on the topic considered. Consensus conferences can all too easily be treated as a public relations 'gadget' for party political benefit. This is where civil society organisations could play a useful role, if necessary with support from member states and EU institutions. Otherwise, the referenda ahead of us may prove to be yet another failed opportunity to bridge the European 'democratic deficit'.

- *Stephen Boucher is author of Europe and its Think-Tanks: A Promise to be Fulfilled for Notre Europe, a think-tank chaired by Jacques Delors; Jean-Yves Le Deaut is a French member of parliament, organiser of France's first national consensus conference and Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul is of Notre Europe.*