

“THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS OF NON AND THE PEOPLE’S PAUSE”

ECPA Briefing June 2005

A founder member of the European Union votes no. It does so for a complex mixture of revenge and fear, located within its national body politic. The result offers no alternative governing majority. Rather it is a cry of pain directed against the political classes, the complexities of globalisation and the generalised angst of being a voter in a twenty-first century democracy. It is confirmation, if one was needed, that modern voters vote on values and fear rather than economic or class interest.

For those who enjoy the politics of pay back, there is much fun to be had. In a national context it is pay back time against the educated, the sophisticated and the powerful. It is pay back time for those who create complex answers for complex problems and then submit them to the simple brutality of the Yes/No referendum. It is pay back time for all those national leaders who use Brussels as a scapegoat for 98% of the time and then switch into unconvincing, rhetorical overdrive for the remaining 2%. Above all it is pay back time for those who chose to ride ahead of the herd, but fail to look back to see if the beef are still following. In essence any ‘No’ is a monument to the weak leadership of European states and European institutions in the last decade.

The usual chorus of self-interest will be busily re-interpreting the result. Euro-sceptics will be claiming that is a line-by-line rejection of the Constitutional Treaty; Euro-philés will point out that many votes to reject came from those who thought that the Constitutional Treaty did not go far enough. Liberalisers will claim that the French electorate really want, or certainly need, less of a social model and more moral fibre with which to succeed globally. Nationalists will claim that the time is right for a root and branch pruning of the European idea. Europe’s competitors around the planet will smile quietly at the thought of another five years of delay in achieving Europe’s potential.

What is to be done? A period of silence and thought would be at least courteous. Let’s call it the People’s Pause. If the revolt is a cry of pain, then

the “doctors” of Europe had better take care with their prime duty to “do no further harm”. If the electors of some founding countries say they don’t like the package and demand attention, Europe owes it to them to step back and examine the Constitutional Treaty item by item. In reality it matters little whether the pause is achieved by declaring the Constitutional Treaty dead, which would require unanimity, or by permitting the British, the Poles and the Irish to announce the suspension of their referenda until the attitude of all other countries is clear. The relevant timetable is not Article IV-442 as per the Constitutional Treaty. It is altogether more political. Negative votes are not rejections of a single Foreign Minister or of European parliamentary control over the agriculture budget, rather they are a response to poor leadership in a time of fear. The European Council must look again at certain aspects of the Treaty of Nice in 2007 after Romanian and Bulgarian entry takes membership up to twenty-seven. 2008 therefore looks like a good year for wrapping up a revised constitutional package ahead of the next European Parliamentary Elections. The leaders of Europe have two and a half years in which to respond intelligently. The current leaders of France, Germany and Britain will be gone well before the Treaty of Nice. The President of the Commission will either have proved himself up to the task, or he too will have gone, felled by parliamentary vote. The delicate business of deciding which elements of the Constitutional Treaty are needed urgently and which can be delayed indefinitely in deference to public doubt will require political judgment of a high order.

However the first task is to end the deadly confusion about the destination of the Union which allows extremist mischief makers to misrepresent it with impunity. An outbreak of truth on the question of Turkey is long overdue. It must now be apparent to every Turk that the Dutch and the French, not to mention the Austrians, would be completely incapable of delivering a popular Yes to Turkey’s accession in ten years time. Work should start now on a real policy of co-operation with Turkey, coupled with a clear confirmation that there will be no membership for the Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova or Belarus. The advocates of an ever-wider Union have just received a serious reality check. Future enlargement will be all about “filling in the gaps” in the Western Balkans, Switzerland and Norway. The European issue needs to be permanently separated from the extremist-friendly subjects of race, religion and terrorism. While it is possible that some of the voters of France were scared into the No camp by a phalanx of Polish plumbers or the prospect of cadres of Croatian craftsmen, many more were frightened into rejection by the prospect of an ever expanding Union that aspired to go beyond what they would recognise as Europe. The uncertainty of European identity is not a case unto itself. It is the sum total of twenty-five national uncertainties.

What then are the implications for public affairs practice? Much of the debate over existing legislative proposals such as REACH will continue unaffected. On matters related to the Lisbon Agenda the business community and their advisors need to pursue the same kind of ruthless triage that cherry picking prime ministers face. They need to put aside their rhetoric and concentrate on those aspects that can be sold to the electorate. All good negotiators have both ideal and acceptable outcomes. For the next four years Europe is going to be about the acceptable. Both good public affairs and the governance of Europe need better decision making. Rightly therefore Impact Assessment and the Transparency Initiative will be debated more vigorously in the context of good governance. More time will need to be devoted to Communications Policy, recognising that this is about what Europe does as well as about what it says it does. Perhaps Peter Mandelson might coach the Commission on the use of focus groups in modern politics. The usual interchange with the rest of the world will continue in the WTO, the WHO and across the Atlantic. Europe has reached the stage where it no longer needs to legislate it prove its existence.

Each of the institutions must give serious thought to how they handle 2009, which is their next likely rendezvous with the peoples of Europe. A European election campaign which actually changed something and conferred legitimacy on the European Parliament and on the President of the European Commission, would be a good start. June 2009 could also be the opportunity for a continent-wide endorsement of the policies put in place by the new leadership of Europe in response to the People's Pause.



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