

Open Letter to the Members of the Convention on the Future of Europe

In the past months, some of you - and I wish to thank them for that - did me the honor to join a panel in one of the 100 conferences of the Newropeans Democracy Marathon.

Two months before the end of this Marathon, and a month only before the end of your own work, I wish to share with you the first lessons drawn from already more than 80 conferences on the future of Europe conducted with some 8,000 Europeans from 20 countries: old and young citizens, farmers and workers, city and country dwellers, immigrants and handicapped people, academics, journalists and NGO leaders, private and public sector staff... Of course I still have a dozen of conferences to conduct in 5 more countries by the end of the Marathon in order to complete the picture; however the image already collected along these debates shows enough convergences to enable a first set of conclusions to be written.

Citizens' opinions on Europe's future constitution is a central element. In a democratic system, it is an unbeatable aim; and in practical terms, the reaction of public opinions will greatly determine the results of the referenda that will take place as well as the Member-States' capacity to amend or not the Convention's project.

What is the political value of the information below?

I consider it contributes greatly to define the conditions of success of a popular ratification of a European constitution; as we all know that in most Member-States, the adoption of the Constitution will depend on referendum-procedures. If the project of Constitution is too remote from the main lines presented below and which result from so many dialogues throughout Europe, I am convinced that those forces which oppose a European Constitution will have no difficulty to gather a majority of voters.

To begin with, let me underline some of the essential results of these discussions with the European citizens. They won't please everybody, but they are faithful to the reality experienced during my « immersion among the Europeans »:

1. A European public opinion is emerging around a hub of coherent political ideas.

The debate on EU limits with the question of enlargement to Turkey, and then the Iraqi crisis have given a strong impetus to this trend.

- **Request for a simple system - understandable by all - to manage the EU.** This eliminates all those complicated inter-institutional arrangements of the last decade (including rotating-presidency considerations)
- **Request for a clear identification of who's in charge in tomorrow's EU.** It has become a strong requirement that a simple answer can be given to the question "Who runs the EU?" ... and not only for the outside world
- **Request to strengthen the role of politicians compared to civil-servants'.** This eliminates right away everything that would appear to reinforce or perpetuate this bureaucratic EU

which marginalizes elected officials to the benefit of appointed ones

- **Rejection of a bureaucratic EU, irresponsible and cut off from peoples.** In this sense, it is politically imperative to suppress the judicial immunities granted to the civil-servants who work within the European institutions (all of them). Without such a reform, the chances of success of the referenda on the Constitution will be greatly diminished providing to its opponents an unanswerable argument.
- **Massive support in favor of an EU that becomes an efficient global actor, speaking with one voice.** It is urgent that the Europeans can assert their common convictions regarding the pre-eminence of international law, multilateralism and negotiation processes. There is no requirement for these evolutions to be conducted by the 25 member-states; but the general aspiration is clearly that those States who wish to move forward should be enabled to do it fast.
- **General wish to be consulted directly on the great orientations of the EU** (Constitution, future enlargements...). This underlines how much referenda on the Constitution are inevitable or their absence would create major political turmoil.

2. The gap between pro- and anti-Europeans is more and more blurred and artificial.

Each citizen now seems to have integrated a dual vision of the European project: full of hopes on one side, full of fears on the other. The European political system should be careful to integrate properly this duality in order to avoid European schizophrenia among citizens pushed to choose artificially between pro or anti. Such an evolution would certainly reduce disinterest in European elections that is otherwise to be expected again in 2004.

3. Differences between citizens from big and small countries are minor.

The Iraqi crisis has weakened even more this difference, as it has increased the sense that a stronger Europe was needed. Citizens have no attachment to « their » Commissioner, or « their » European deputy, for the simple reason that they usually don't know who they are nor what they do. A great difference though should be made between the assertions made by their "national elites" who try to preserve privileges; and the opinion of the citizens. In the same way, the fear to see the EU threaten national cultural identities is just as strong in the small countries than in the big ones. Every one is aware that every country has now become a minority in the EU.

4. The political staff seems inadequate to the Europe that's being built.

Citizens long for their choices to be implemented in a positive way. They find rather incompatible the importance of the European challenges and the fact that the EU serves as political asylum following an electoral failure or at the end of a national carrier. Neither do they understand that Europe is « managed part-time ». They now expect European political representatives who are credible, have a future and are fully dedicated to the EU. This requirement should simplify the choice regarding the procedures to select them.

Regarding the ratification, things are quite simple. A project of Constitution that is not citizen friendly will lead to strong abstention. A project of Constitution that will fail to prove that the citizens' fears (namely in terms of democracy) are groundless will generate strong opposition. If both are cumulated, a major political crisis could start in Europe.

Communicating a complex political project towards 500 million people with so many different cultures, requires to be very lucid on their expectations, to conceive a project simple to explain and to avoid by any means to provide to its enemies powerful arguments. I don't know if that's an easy task; but I'm sure it is possible: with the Newropeans Democracy Marathon, I have experienced it concretely nearly every day since November 2002.

While hoping these few elements will contribute usefully to this last phase of your mission so essential to our common future.

Franck Biancheri

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