

What Now? More Europe!

Jun 10, 2005 Álvaro de Vasconcelos

The rejection of the European Union's Constitution by French and Dutch voters forces us to think well beyond that treaty. That much is clear from the current debate on the Community budget. The naysayers' victories show that sovereignty-based arguments that oppose any kind of European political union are on the march. Euroskeptics, it seems, are gaining ground everywhere, and a kind of xenophobia is on the rise.

But xenophobia and sovereignty were not the primary impulses that propelled the "no" votes. Above all, the "no" votes in France and Holland – and rising discontent in other member states, such as Germany – are the result of the inability of national governments and the Union to respond effectively to the problems that most concern citizens. Not only anti-Europeans rejected the constitution; far from it. Many Europeans are, in fact, calling on the EU to act to reduce unemployment and to intervene decisively in the international arena. Many interpreted Europe's internal division over the war in Iraq, with ordinary citizens overwhelmingly opposed to military intervention, as a sign of the Union's weakness. But the answer to such doubt and dismay is *more* Europe, not less. The European Council's summit on June 16-17 should give a clear sign that it recognizes this. Most supporters of the Constitution believe that it will not only help build a citizens' Europe, but also create better conditions for European economic development, and for the EU to act globally. They are right. It would be imprudent to assume that the French and Dutch "no" votes were not about discontent with Union policies; but that anger was directed against the French and Dutch governments, not Europe itself. The fact is that citizens in every EU member country are increasingly aware that national policies are determined by decision making at the European level, over which they have little influence. The European Constitution has little to do with this, but referenda are never confined to the actual questions put to voters. Instead, they provide opportunities for citizens to express what they feel about the choices their governments make, particularly within the EU framework.

The 2004 elections for the European Parliament had already shown that the level of discontent with the Union was high. Voters heavily punished almost all national governments. Yet nobody thought that that election had changed the course of Europe.

Above all, the French and Dutch referendums confirmed that politics in the Union is now conducted "on the street," and that it is no longer possible to "construct" Europe at a distance and by stealth. This means that EU governments must respond to popular anxieties and make the Union more transparent and democratic. This would be a lot easier with the Constitution in place, but there are measures that can and should be adopted now to make that possible. First, the community budget should be structured so that it has a significant impact on growth and employment (a return to the voluntarism of the Delors Packages, now applied to the Lisbon Strategy). Second, European governments must show a real commitment to act together. A key opportunity presents itself with the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration to define a common position to support democratic change in the Mediterranean by ceasing to back the political status quo there. Finally, Council meetings should be open when legislative matters are at stake, so that citizens can know who voted for what and according to which

criteria. All of this can be decided at the next European Council, even before the constitutional problem is resolved. This kind of action is more likely to win back a skeptical citizenry than any information campaign, however well designed. At the same time, it is necessary to solve the Constitutional deadlock. As already proposed by the Convention, this would mean separating constitutional matters *per se* from Union policy. The real innovations are found in Part I and II of the proposed Constitution, in the definition of the normative and political identity of the Union, its competences, the new institutional balance – including the creation of a European Minister of Foreign Affairs – and, last but not least, the introduction of a Bill of Rights. The part that was actually rejected and raises the most concerns among citizens of the member States is in Part III, which focuses on Union policies such as the Common Market, competition policy and the Common Agricultural Policy. So the first and second parts could be ratified without new negotiations and could form the basis for the new Treaty, so that the Treaty of Nice would still apply; and the debate on the European social model would continue. It is essential to reaffirm the normative essence of the Constitutional Treaty to protect the greatest achievement of the Constitutional Convention. Diversity and inclusiveness, through the integration of European democracies with a common project, remains Europe's great gift to the world. It is what has made Europe an "international public good" to use former Brazilian foreign minister Celso Lafer's felicitous turn of phrase. Such a Europe is better placed to contribute to a fairer international order than the narrow, bitter Europe the xenophobes have in mind. For Europe to remain a promise for the world, it must thrive as a public good for all its citizens. Europe and Europeans cannot wait for a new treaty to show that the Union is able to fulfill that promise.