'Heavens above, the people are going to vote!' from Die Zeit (29 April 2004)

Caption: On 29 April 2004, commenting on the enlargement of the European Union to include 10 new Member States and with a view to the European elections and the national referenda on the European Constitution, the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit emphasises the central role to be played by European citizens in the new Europe.

Source: Die Zeit. 29.04.2004, Nr. 19. Hamburg. "Huch, das Volk soll abstimmen", auteur:Ross, Jan , p. 4.

URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/heavens_above_the_people_are_going_to_vote_from_die_zeit_29_april_2004-en-6126b65d-119e-4f02-9ed7-2a420dfdc046.html

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Heavens above, the people are going to vote!

In between EU enlargement, the Constitution and European elections, a new player makes his entrance on the stage: the Citizen

By Jan Ross

The people, the peoples, are suddenly part of the game. Shock, horror! The British referendum plan has rolled into the experts' enclosure where the EU constitutional project is taking shape — and threatens to wreck everything. The promoters and sponsors of the enterprise do not deserve sympathy. They cannot get away so lightly with glib talk of a Constitution just to boost some sense of 'European-ness' so that the authors of the text can feel a little bit like the American founding fathers in 1787. The C-word is too big a mouthful. Not only is there no European nation, there is absolutely no need for a Constitution nor even approximately any general demand for this kind of founding act or gesture going beyond practical and appropriate Treaty reforms. In a comparable context, Ralf Dahrendorf, mischievously but not without perspicacity, has referred to Latin America as a 'graveyard of constitutions' for which no one has asked, which mean nothing and which are soon forgotten. This politics of sham constitutions has something of the banana republic about it. But even sham constitutionalists, if we take them at their word, can raise fears of a superstate. That is what we now have to tackle.

The constitutional idea is not the only cause of rebellion or disaffection. The Greek Cypriots have just rejected a reunification plan for the island supported by the EU. In the context of enlargement to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, thoughts in the West turn to criminality, unwanted immigration and wage and tax dumping. Being fed up with Europe is European normality, almost tradition. People grumble about Brussels just as they do in the United States about Washington — a cold war between the people and the elites in which the battle lines have long been firmly drawn. But this is a particular moment at which the EU has a great deal on its plate — not just the constitutional project and the ten new Member States but also the question of Turkey and that very indigestible morsel, Iraq. All this at a time when the euro zone is showing a more worrying rate of growth than any other region in the world, with persistently high unemployment rates. Could it all at some time become too much and too difficult for people to accept this Europe, could the ice become too thin for this wagon-train of integration as it drives on to ever more distant horizons?

There is a school of thought according to which European affairs are of no concern at all to the people. Walter Hallstein, the first President of the European Economic Community founded in 1957, which was the precursor to the EU, sought reliance on 'material logic', a kind of anonymous automatism which drives the integration process forward: once you have a common market, you need a currency union, then you have to harmonise financial and economic policy and, ultimately — because everything is interconnected — foreign and security policy too. No one today admits to believing in a European clockwork mechanism of this kind, ticking relentlessly on according to some natural law, at least not in public; all have learned not to be 'remote from the citizen'. But the idea that what is necessary must come to pass and, in the end, the citizen must simply get used to it has remained a typical attitude in European policy. Helmut Kohl wanted the euro and brought it into being, although he knew that the Deutschmark was the darling of the German people. Its success has vindicated him; the common currency has become a fact of everyday life, much more quickly than most thought it would. The controversy over price rises triggered by the changeover to the euro has also not been forgotten, however, and people are now a little more mistrustful when 'historic steps' are taken in Brussels.

What Europeans really think of the EU is not easy to discover, and the findings of ostensibly objective opinion polls are contradictory. The European Commission regularly takes the pulse of the population by means of a long list of questions in its 'Eurobarometer' survey. Confidence in the European Union, it notes, perhaps with some amazement, is on average higher than that in national parliaments and governments, and in almost all countries, including the United Kingdom, the majority consider the rate of integration to be too slow. The overwhelming majority of those pro-integration citizens who are so dissatisfied with their individual countries, however, want to be sure that the national veto is retained — that instrument of power of national

governments, despised as they are, and the bogey of all true Euro-enthusiasts.

One could say that the glass of European enthusiasm is either half full or half empty. But there is no doubt that the level has fallen in recent years. For the first time since spring 2000, a little less than 50 % of those questioned in autumn 2003 considered that the EU membership of their country was ‘a good thing’. The mood has soured considerably in the founder countries of the Community, with a positively dramatic cooling of enthusiasm in Germany and the Benelux countries and all-time record levels of disaffection in France and Italy. The old, familiar Europe is no more, and its original inhabitants look to the new one with particular unease.

More evident than the mood of the population with regard to European politics is the fear that governments have of their peoples with regard to European politics. In France, where enlargement to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is unpopular and Turkish accession is an explosive issue, the Government wants to avoid a constitutional referendum and has invented a Euro-ideological justification for such a tactic: we must do as the Germans do, in the name of solidarity and in anticipation of a common future, i.e. act through Parliament, if possible on the same day in both Paris and Berlin in order to strengthen the symbolic content. It is the palpable mendacity of such a manoeuvre, the double game of empty gesture and governmental obfuscation, which can indeed lead to a ‘Europe’ on the quasi-official model espoused by Brussels.

The position is not much better as regards the idea of a Europe-wide constitutional referendum which, although unrealistic, has had a good press in Germany because it does not sound so unpleasantly populist and nationalistic. A European referendum presupposes precisely that European people in which the anti-constitutionalists do not believe or to which they do not want to belong. It is precisely fear of the abolition of national sovereignty which forms the core of Euro-scepticism, and this fear will not be dispelled by supranational plebiscites in which Finns and Spaniards decide that British people must have no fear of a European superstate.

The anti-EU muttering among the people and across the nations is, therefore, something completely different and goes much deeper than the complaint over the now proverbial ‘democratic deficit’ of the Union, which is allegedly ruled by Councils of Ministers and Commission bureaucracies not subject to any democratic control. Those who cry ‘democratic deficit’ want more rights for the European Parliament or want issues to be decided, where possible, by plebiscites among the citizens of the Union; at all events, they want more European democracy and act within the context of the communitisation philosophy. The democratisation of the EU may be a noble and perhaps even useful undertaking. But it will not allay the fears of anyone who believes that the whole European project is monstrous, a Tower of Babel under construction.

The problem of Euro-political orthodoxy is that it has absolutely no organ of perception for such feelings and, hence, also no language in which to respond. It is unable to understand that its own action is not self-evident or that any explanation is called for as to why the Community should be constantly ‘deepened’, why sovereignty should be abandoned or why there should be an ‘ever closer union’ — ultimately, all that is taken for granted and, at most, justified rhetorically through PR, for external consumption, for the stupid. The main fault of ‘Euro-discourse’ is not that it is remote from the people or complicated, but that it avoids what is difficult and fundamental and is intellectually second-rate. When Giscard’s Convention presented its draft for an EU Constitutional Treaty last summer, *The Economist* published an article on ‘Europe’s new Constitution’ with a cover picture graphically conveying the cosmopolitan British magazine’s opinion of the proposed text. It showed a wastepaper basket and over it the headline: ‘Where to file it’. Weeks later, utterances of uncomprehending revulsion at this impertinence were to be heard from the pro-integrationists. The polemic was not even perceived as a challenge, as a gauntlet thrown down and meant to be taken up, but as *lèse-majesté*. People who are so deficient in sporting instinct cannot hope to make much of an impression on a contentious public.

The strange thing in all this is, at the same time, that ‘Europe’ once again has a ring to it, a sense that something is expected of it — for the first time since 1989, when the revolutionaries in the countries of Eastern Europe and their peoples wanted to come ‘home to Europe’. The fact that the atrocities of 11 March in Madrid represented an ‘attack on Europe’, as many newspaper headlines read, was more than a flourish;

people felt ‘targeted’ in a different way than by the bombs in Casablanca or Istanbul. The Iraq war split the governments of the EU, but the Bush phenomenon gave the collectivity of Europe a powerful impetus towards identity and harmonisation — the fact of not being American together is clearly a strong binding force. The sense of ‘us’ becomes the key to the question of Turkish accession and the frontiers of the EU in general: where does enlargement end, where does a different world begin in relation to which we are simply Europeans?

All that is unfinished business, mere raw material for a possible European policy. Amid all the talk of identity, there is a danger of chauvinism, a tendency to represent Europe as a kind of fortress, defensive and forbidding, against Turkey, against America, against a brand of international capitalism in the face of which Europeans would desperately strive to preserve their own social model. It is a paradox of the moment in history that, to avert this self-imposed danger, Europe needs nothing so much as the participation of Great Britain — that dogged, individualistic, arch-liberal and quintessentially democratic island, that old sea power with its gaze turned to the Atlantic and the world beyond, with which a centralist Brussels decked out as a fortress will never be able to deal. Perhaps the chance will be lost if the United Kingdom actually leaves the EU as a result of the constitutional referendum. Conversely, however, nothing would augur better for Europe than if it succeeded in winning the British over.