

TIME FOR A REALITY CHECK

The rejection of the European Constitution by Dutch and French voters is just the tip of an iceberg, argues Simon Titley

“It is time to give ourselves a reality check,” Tony Blair told the European Parliament on 23 June. He was referring only to the European Union, but he doesn’t realise the half of it.

The French and Dutch referendum results were the outcome of a more fundamental problem, the widespread popular alienation from the whole political system. Instead of addressing this issue, most commentators chose to ride their familiar hobbyhorses.

Predictably, in Britain there were delusional reactions across the political spectrum. Eurosceptics saw these results not only as a vindication of their position (without noticing the irony of their expressions of solidarity with foreigners), but also viewed them as a purely EU-related phenomenon.

First prize for the most ridiculous Eurosceptic hyperbole of the season must go to the London *Evening Standard*. Following the breakdown of the EU summit on 17 June, that night’s front-page headline screamed, “Now it’s war”.

Unfortunately, the reaction of Europhiles was little better. They seized on the incoherence of the ‘no’ camp to suggest that voters were stupid, ignorant or gullible, and their votes somehow invalid.

Let us first of all strip away some myths about the motivations of ‘no’ voters in France and the Netherlands. A Eurobarometer survey of public opinion was conducted in both countries immediately after each referendum. The main reasons for French ‘no’ voters were:

- 31% - The economy/jobs will suffer
- 26% - Because the economy is bad
- 19% - Because it’s too ‘liberal’ an economic plan
- 18% - Opposition to the national government and president
- 16% - Not socialist enough for Europe
- 12% - Too complex
- 6% - Against Turkey joining the EU
- 5% - Loss of national sovereignty

The main reasons for their Dutch counterparts were:

- 32% - Lack of information
- 19% - Loss of national sovereignty
- 14% - Opposition to the national government
- 13% - Europe is too expensive
- 8% - Opposition to European integration
- 7% - It will have negative effects on employment, etc.

Whatever else these results indicated, it was not the wet dream of the British Eurosceptic press. Both results were less ‘anti-European’ than a manifestation of a broader problem, a growing sense of emotional distance from political institutions at both a national and international level, already evident in declining political participation and more volatile voting habits among those who still vote.

We are witnessing a massive breakdown in trust, and it is not confined to politics. Everywhere one looks, once-respected individuals and institutions are losing popular trust. Doctors, the police, big business, the royal family – groups that once enjoyed a ‘blue chip’ reputation have seen their respect and trust eroded. Traditional elites are being rejected and, because they do not understand why, their responses are inept.

There is a tendency among right-wingers to assume that this alienation is entirely a product of politics and the public sector, but it is just as evident in people’s feelings towards big business, both as customers and employees. Shoshana Zuboff and James Maxmin, in their book *The Support Economy*, catalogue the growing popular dissatisfaction with poor customer service, and the growing impatience of workers with old-fashioned, hierarchical management.

The basic cause of these reactions against political and business oligarchies is the radical social transformation in western societies over the past fifty years. People have more opportunity yet a deepening sense of insecurity. Despite achieving unprecedented material well-being, they live in a more impersonal world with an uncertain future.

What changed? Until the 1960s, most people had their identities given to them by the traditional groups to which they belonged (family, community, social class or church). Today, most people create their own identities and select their own peer groups. This individualism has been brought about by a combination of affluence, education, secularisation, technological advance and sexual liberation, which released the majority of people from lives circumscribed by day-to-day subsistence and group dogma, and which popularised the concept of ‘lifestyle choice’.

But this process of individual liberation has proved something of a double-edged sword because, although it has enabled most people in Western societies to lead easier and more pleasant lives, it has also led people to forsake social cohesion for materialist individualism.

Self-realisation and affluence are preferable conditions to conformity and poverty, but they have not necessarily led to people having a greater sense of control over their lives. John Kampfner, writing in the *Observer* (27 March), pointed to the spiritual emptiness in our modern, atomised society.

“A reliable flow of disposable income does not automatically translate into security or well-being. Look around your average British small town. By day, you see high streets denuded of character as the big retailers dominate and, at night, people out on benders staggering from pub to pub. This is not part of an audition for Grumpy Old Men. This is what people, who resent being valued only as

consuming objects, told me... It is this emptiness, I would argue, that is being manifested now.”

We have more wealth and choice than ever before, but never have people felt more alone. They inhabit a world of alienation from the cradle to the grave. They are born in industrial-scale maternity units (remember the machine that goes ‘ping’ in Monty Python’s *Meaning of Life*?). They are educated in factory schools designed for a bygone industrial age. They hate their insecure jobs (average employee turnover in Europe is now between 2.5 and 3 years). They retire to an uncertain pension and die in large hospitals, wired up to more machines that go ‘ping’.

People are better educated and more assertive. At the same time, most of their social relationships have been replaced by economic ones. They have ‘choice’ but mainly of a trivial, consumerist variety, and feel they have little control over their lives. Their anger and frustration may be incoherent but are no less real for that.

Our institutions and leaders do not understand what is happening and have failed to adapt to meet popular expectations. An example was the recent Tory election slogan, ‘Are you thinking what we’re thinking?’ Frank Furedi, writing in *Spiked* (4 May), noted “when the Tories ask ‘are you thinking what we’re thinking?’, what they really want to know is: ‘What the hell is on your mind?’ The question is posed in a way that suggests the Tories possess a privileged insight into the minds of the British public, but scratch away the thin layer of smugness and all that is left is a group of dazed politicians, genuinely unsure about what they are thinking, never mind us.”

The only answer to this basic ignorance among our political and business elites is for them to enter into a real engagement with people. Only through such interaction can we begin to re-connect our institutions to the people they are meant to serve.

Unfortunately, our elites disdain and avoid contact with the public. They prefer to outsource such contacts to consultants and advisors. They use polls, surveys and focus groups to try and find out what people are thinking. But these formal and artificial methods do not supply a real insight into popular concerns, nor do they keep the elites in touch. Only genuine dialogue can do that.

That is not to say that political leaders should follow rather than lead public opinion. On the contrary, European politics is hamstrung by its lack of leadership. It is rather that, to lead people, you must engage them and carry their opinion with you.

What are the lessons for the European Union? In the short term, everyone must recognise that the constitution is dead. From a technical standpoint, the constitution was a more logical rulebook for running the EU institutions than the present arrangements. The problem is that technocratic solutions won’t work.

Theodore Zeldin, writing in the *Observer* (29 May), remarked that, “Europe is a fact. But it still needs to become a dream. ...the French [referendum] campaign has shown that the European constitution, written by lawyers focusing on rules and regulations, rather than by poets expressing new emotions, allows old emotions to prevail.”

When the EU was born in the post-war era, relevant and powerful emotional links existed. Most Europeans had had a recent, first-hand and traumatic experience of war and starvation. A new set of political arrangements that would

prevent these horrors represented a political narrative to which everyone could relate.

An equivalent narrative is missing today. Few people under 65 have any memory of war or starvation. The useful but workaday drudgery of the EU institutions, largely concerned with technical harmonisation directives, cannot fill the emotional gap.

It is not as if the ingredients for a modern narrative do not exist. There is a curious cognitive dissonance about Europe. British people inhabit a world in which they can routinely take cheap flights to Prague or Lisbon; go on booze cruises to Calais; buy a range of food and drink once regarded as exotic; and buy holiday homes in Spain or retire to France. Such activities would not be impossible without the EU; rather, the EU makes such travel and trading easier and more likely. But while people are living the European dream in these and many other practical ways, their perceptions of the EU are quite separate from their experiences.

Popular hostility to the EU constitution does not imply support for or opposition to any particular vision of the EU, whether it be a free-trade area, a closer union of nation states or a federal superstate. Instead, it tells us that, whichever future is chosen, the EU can no longer develop in any direction without a renewal of civic engagement.

Let me give one small example. Local butchers in my home county of Lincolnshire launched a campaign last year to persuade the EU to give ‘protected geographical indication status’ to the Lincolnshire Sausage. This would provide locally made sausages with statutory protection, under EU regulations that protect food names on a geographical basis. If the campaigners are successful, only sausages made in Lincolnshire to a traditional recipe may be sold as ‘Lincolnshire Sausages’. Imitations made outside the county could no longer be passed off as the real thing.

More imaginative political leadership would not only support such local initiatives but also link up similar producers across Europe, enabling them to discuss their common concerns and campaign jointly (something the existing raft of bureaucratic European trade associations has singularly failed to do). By joining the dots, a genuine pan-European polity could be built from the ground up.

The political benefit of such work is that it would demonstrate the value of the EU to the ordinary citizen, who might otherwise perceive it as a remote bureaucracy. The more the EU becomes a forum where local people can campaign for their interests, the more it will have come of age, and the more it can evolve in tune with popular needs and opinion.

The referendum defeats were a necessary catharsis for the EU. A crisis was inevitable and, the longer it might have been deferred, the worse it would have been. What, then, is the main lesson of this sorry episode? Less constitution, more sausage.

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