

Period of reflection: structure, subjects and context for an assessment of the debate on the European Union

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report by dAndrew **DUFF** (ADLE, UK) and Johannes **VOGGENHUBER** (Greens/ALE, AT) on the period of reflection on the European Constitution. The resolution was adopted by 385 votes in favour, 125 against and 51 abstentions. To recall, the European Constitution was rejected by the people of France and the Netherlands in 2005. The European Council decided on a period of reflection to enable a broad debate to take place, and agreed that the original timetable for the entry into force of the Constitution (1 November 2006) would be extended.

In its resolution, Parliament reaffirmed its conviction that the Treaty of Nice is not a viable basis for the continuation of the European integration process. It confirmed its commitment to achieving a constitutional settlement that strengthens parliamentary democracy, transparency and the rule of law, anchors fundamental rights, develops citizenship, and enhances the capacity of the enlarged Union to act effectively at home and abroad. Without such a constitutional settlement it would not be possible for the Union to expect the support of its citizens, to maintain the momentum of integration and to become a credible partner in world affairs. Parliament called on the European Council of June 2006 solemnly to declare the same commitment to a constitutional settlement on the future of Europe.

Parliament acknowledged that the ratification of the Constitution had now encountered difficulties that may prove to be insurmountable unless measures can be taken to meet the concerns expressed in France, the Netherlands and elsewhere. It stressed that it is not possible to further enlarge the Union after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania on the basis of the Treaty of Nice. The political problems and institutional weakness that the Convention was set up to address will persist – and, indeed, grow – unless and until the reforms enshrined in the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe are brought into force. Many of the concerns expressed relate more to general and specific problems of context than to the text itself. If progress could be made in such issues, it would be easier to find a solution regarding the text.

Parliament resisted proposals to establish core groups of certain Member States while the constitutional process was still in train and deplored any suggestion that coalitions of certain Member States could be formed outside the EU system. Furthermore, a strategy based on the selective implementation of the Constitution risked destroying the consensus that achieved a balance between the institutions and among Member States, thereby aggravating the crisis of confidence.

It proposed using the current period of reflection to re-launch the constitutional project on the basis of a broad public debate about the future of European integration. This European dialogue should aim to deepen and democratise the consensus around the Constitution and address criticisms and find solutions where expectations have not been met. This new dialogue, should be conducted across the Union, structured by common themes and in realistic stages according to an agreed framework for evaluation, and designed to lead to decisive political choices.

Parliament insisted that the public debate be engaged within both the European and the national framework, since narrowly focused national debates will do little to change national stereotypes. An imposed dialogue without political goals would become nebulous, even vacuous, thereby giving rise to increased disaffection on the part of European citizens. It proposed that the European Parliament and

national parliaments should jointly organise conferences – 'Parliamentary Forums' – in order to stimulate the debate and stated that it would invite the other EU institutions to contribute to the Forums. Parliament will publish 'European Papers' on each of the big issues facing the Union, which may be used as a common European template for the national debates and which, together with contributions from national parliaments, should be used as the basis for the deliberations of the Parliamentary Forums.

A first interparliamentary Forum should be convened in the spring of 2006. It should identify a limited number of priority questions such as: the goal of European integration; the role should Europe have in the world; the future of the European social and economic model in the light of globalisation; defining the borders of the EU; how to enhance freedom, security and justice; and how to finance the EU.

Parliament asked Member States to organise a large number of public meetings and media debates on the future of Europe - 'Citizens' Forums' - at national, regional and local level, structured along the commonly agreed themes, with the assistance of the Commission. It urged the social partners and civil society organisations to get engaged in these debates. Political parties should give much more prominence to the European dimension in both their internal debates and electoral campaigning. Citizens' petitions that contribute to shaping the debate would be welcome.

Parliament went on to suggest that the conclusions of the period of reflection should be drawn at the latest in the second half of 2007, and that a clear decision be reached at that stage about how to proceed with the Constitution. There are several options available to the Union ranging from abandoning the constitutional project altogether, continuing to try to ratify the present text unamended, seeking to clarify or add to the present text, restructuring and/or modifying the present text with the aim of improving it, or embarking upon a complete re-write. A positive outcome of the period of reflection would be that the current text could be maintained, although this would only be possible if accompanied by significant measures to reassure and convince public opinion.

Parliament stressed that Romania and Bulgaria must be involved in all the actions referred to above. In any case every effort should be made to ensure that the Constitution enters into force during 2009.