

Why should we have a referendum on any European Constitution, Treaty (mini or maxi) or whatever it ends up be called?

Let's deal with referendums in general first and then any European referendum in particular. It must be clear that we long ago passed the age of the horse and cart which dictated the form of representative democracy that underpins the parliamentary system we know in the UK today. Such a system was based on the assumption that someone had to be sent down (or up) to London to attend a parliament of fixed duration to take decisions on certain, often specific, tax raising issues. Now we all have greater mobility, we have modern forms of communication and universal education. So why are we so reticent about entrusting a little more decision making to the people?

It must be clear that the moment has arrived when we have witnessed a wholesale disconnection between government and governed; this was demonstrated so clearly over the Iraq war. The people want to be involved in the major decisions facing society. They are unimpressed either by a parliamentary decision making process that puts almost all power in the hands of the governing majority or by a bunch of elected politicians, most of whom they unfortunately do not trust.

Maybe if politicians stopped trying to pretend that they have all the wisdom to make all the decisions and allowed a few out to the people, some semblance of trust might just be re-established. After all, we have had endless consultations from this government and even on-line petitions, but there is no formal process to allow these mechanisms to go anywhere and people become more disenchanted rather than further engaged. There has to be some real excitement, some real participation and public debate; a debate that allows a grown up, frustrated and angry population to participate.

In Yorkshire we feel it strongly. We have been promised no less than four referendums by this government and had all of them snapped away from under our noses when the government found such democratic instruments inconvenient. As the referendums closed in, the government became afraid to enter into a real dialogue and campaign for a yes vote, whether it be on the Euro, the previous Constitutional Treaty, a change to the voting system or, more importantly for Yorkshire, an elected assembly for our region. The arguments in favour or against these issues will not go away by not talking about them. Instead, they fester on and create distrust and antagonism, and so the current irritable attitude we have towards the EU.

Look, by contrast, at one of the countries that has used referendums to define its European relationship: Switzerland. You might say that they rejected EU membership. True, yet they have gone on to have a series of referendums about their relationship with the EU, indeed no less than three last year. One on joining Schengen, one on free movement of people and another on their financial contribution to EU enlargement. There was a positive vote on all three and more importantly they now have a population that is informed and more relaxed about their relationship with Europe. Are we grown up enough in the UK to have such public deliberations? Would our politicians have the 'dare' factor to really debate immigration and the British rebate with the people? Apparently not. We are told that the subject matter is too complicated and as we are a parliamentary democracy these matters are beyond the

public's comprehension. How patronising is that, especially given that we were originally trusted to make the decision on British membership by referendum? What has changed?

Thirty years on it should be easier to make the pro-European case or it would be if national politicians had kept both themselves and the public up to speed with developments. Pro-European politicians who refuse a referendum do the European cause no good in the longer term; rather it just creates suspicion that we have something to hide. If we are to have a positive relationship with the EU we have to be completely transparent about it.

The referendum in 1974 was, for me, the first time I was able to vote. I remember it clearly, caught between loyalty to a party whose views I disagreed with and a proposition I wholeheartedly supported. It made me think. It defined my political views and direction. I do not want other people making up my mind for me on issues of such importance; I want my own say and so I am sure do many others.

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