



by Enrico Letta

EDITORIAL

Yet again, France is at the centre of European history, once more the arbiter of the fate of the integration process. In a few weeks, almost sixty million French will pronounce judgement on the ratification of the Constitution. The alternatives are clear: yes or no, in or out. Just like on 30 August 1954, when the Paris National Assembly's vote caused the failure of the EDC (the European Defence Community), freezing the hopes for a political community for decades. Before that time, the project for European unification had made some progress and been the cause of many arguments and splits. At the height of the post-war period and reconstruction, ambitious prospects had taken shape around the idea of unification. Perhaps they were too ambitious in comparison with the level of maturation that had been reached in the meantime. There was a moment, between 1952 and 1953, when the founding fathers' dream seemed about to come true. The United States of Europe were just around the corner. Then, the halt we all know about: because it had to block the march of political and defence integration, and develop, almost subordinately, around industrial and commercial policies, the Community abandoned its political ambitions and focused exclusively on the economy. History has shown, however, that vote was not the catastrophe for Europe that was feared. Without that setback we probably would not have been able to concentrate our best energies on the construction of the monetary Union or on the liberalisation of the internal market. And perhaps today the Community would have been a sort of smaller version of the European Council or a continental version of NATO.

However, for the referendum on 29 May, there will be no second chances. We have always deferred the time for making decisions, preferring to achieve important, but not



decisive, results rather than pursuing a responsible, but dangerous *redde rationem*. The fact is that delay after delay, Europe has, in reality, changed. It would be irresponsible not to sound a loud alarm. Starting with the French date. The obstacle of ratifying the Constitution through a referendum will have to be overcome in 10 more countries, but it is not impossible to imagine that if a minor country, or one outside the euro zone, should block the text, the resulting crisis could be superable. On the contrary, a French “no” would be irreversible. With traumatic repercussions on the sustainability of a political construct missing one of its founding

_ On 29 May, the French will pronounce judgement on the ratification of the Constitution. The results will be crucial for the future of the most ambitious project of the 20th century, which seems to have become just another one of many areas of disagreement in the 2007 presidential election campaign.



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countries, moreover, a country that has always been a driving force in integration.

However, apart from the result of the referendum, the equilibrium of the current community construct is at risk from the impact of the umpteenth conflicting drive between communitarianism and intergovernmental method. An institutional frame of reference, able to ensure political stability and consistency in the new, expanded Europe is needed in response to an articulation of expertise conditioned by increasingly complex and confused procedures.

The agreement on the Constitution's text, although comforting, seems to have been reached late. And, above all, it suffers from a general difficulty in communicating its values and contents to European citizens. It is difficult to sell Europe as a success to the worker from a textile company hit, when the Multifibers Agreement goes into effect, by an invasion of Chinese products. It is difficult to sell it to the producer of Spanish or Italian tomatoes worried about the arrival of commodities from every corner of the world. Or to the Slovenian or Polish worker who thought he would finally become a European citizen and instead finds himself constrained by a moratorium that limits his mobility in the Union. But, above all, it is really difficult to accept that all of this is happening in a Europe that, despite being in a phase of world economic upsurge, has suffered through years of stagnation and still is not experiencing growth.

In the face of these facts, how can the charm of a constitutional charter be communicated? A ratification referendum on the European scale would presumably have contributed to the initiation of a high level discussion of these and other challenges, thereby focusing our attention on the Europe of the future. Instead, holding the discussion on the national level only diminishes the terms of the debate. Which is exactly what is happening in France, where the most ambitious project of the 20th century seems to have become just another one of many areas of disagreement in the 2007 presidential election campaign.

Who knows, perhaps once again, like in '54, the French vote will, in the end, set us moving in the right direction. Bureaucratic continuism is not the best way to ensure that this happens. Rather, an acceleration, that perhaps only the founding countries can lead us in, is necessary. Naturally, only if, while resisting the lure of any neo-nationalistic tendencies, they are capable of reinventing the Union. A Union with a new culture for governing the economy and the society, in which State and market find an equilibrium different from the pattern found in historical social democracies, but also different from a model based solely on the market and its internal reasoning.
