



## Federal Trust Policy Commentary

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### Time to get moving

AMID ALL THE swirl of argument and speculation, three aspects of the Prime Minister's decision to call an eventual referendum on the European constitutional treaty are undisputed. He is taking a vast risk; he is doing it at least partly for the electoral advantage of the Labour Party; and the announcement of his sudden political reversal was an administrative shambles. The long march towards winning a referendum on the European constitution has not begun well for Mr. Blair.

The Panglossians will insist that none of this matters. By the time the referendum arrives (if it ever does) the electorate will have forgotten any initial confusion and hesitations. The template of the 1975 referendum campaign will reassert itself, when opinion moved substantially in a pro-European direction during the course of the referendum campaign. This complacent assumption needs to be treated with great scepticism.

In truth, there is very little common ground between a European referendum in 2005 and that of thirty years earlier. In 1975, all the main political parties were campaigning for a 'yes' vote. The mass media, business, finance and the British Establishment in all its varied forms were unanimously or preponderantly with the main political parties. Public opinion at that time was infinitely more malleable on European issues. Twenty years of Eurosceptic propaganda had not yet

done their work. Moreover, in 1975, a 'yes' vote was clearly a vote for the status quo, always an advantage in winning a referendum. It will be one of the points at issue in the referendum debate of 2005 precisely how destabilising a positive or negative British vote on the European constitution might be.

It is said that the Prime Minister regards it as a great failure of his time as Prime Minister that he has been unable to take Britain into the European single currency. There are highly pertinent lessons to be drawn from that failure, which must be taken to heart for there to be any chance of a positive outcome to the European constitutional referendum. Over the past seven years, the Prime Minister let the argument about the European single currency drift. He seemed concerned primarily to mark tactical points against the Conservatives, for their excess of zeal against the euro, and even against the Liberal Democrats, for their excess of zeal in favour of the single currency. Britain in Europe, the supposed pro-euro campaigning organisation, for long took its cautious and uncertain tone from Downing Street. Those hostile to British membership of the single currency were under no such inhibitions. Their clear message of rejection has firmly lodged itself in the mind of the British electorate.

If a similar outcome is to be avoided on the European constitution, it is vital that

the government and its allies enter into the political and public battle as soon as possible. To wait until after the General Election would be much too late. In its own interest, the government will rightly be looking to hold the referendum as late as possible. If there has been a negative vote from other countries before then, it would make little sense to hold a referendum in any case. If a large number of other countries have already ratified the constitution, then that will be a powerful argument in the government's hand. But if it is to win the European constitutional referendum, the government must use the coming months to good advantage. It needs rapidly to establish a coalition of the pro-European willing, a coalition of which it is a leading member, but which it does not attempt to dominate. If it is able to convince the electorate that Britain's future role in Europe really does hang on a positive vote on the constitution, then this coalition has a genuine chance of winning. If the argument centres around such esoteric matters as the permanent Chair of the European Council and its supposed contribution to the fight against federalism, the referendum will be lost. The government's urgent task is now to find a European rhetoric which is accessible, positive and credible. Its record in this area has been thus far distinctly mixed.