



Federal Trust Policy Commentary

July 2004 • The Federal Trust, 7 Graphite Square, Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5EE • www.fedtrust.co.uk

The British Government and the European Constitution – history repeats itself

In the two months since he promised to the House of Commons a referendum on the European Constitution, it has become clear that the Prime Minister wants to postpone all discussion of this inconvenient issue until after next year's General Election. In the General Election campaign of 2001, Mr. Blair avoided any substantial debate on Europe by pointing to the supposedly forthcoming referendum on the euro. 2005 will see a similar pattern. The Labour government will look to be reelected in the first half of the year, having campaigned as little as possible on European issues. For the Prime Minister, the British Presidency of the EU in the latter half of 2005 will seem early enough to start to prepare British public opinion for a referendum in the course of 2006.

There is of course a risk in these delaying tactics. Those hostile to the Constitution have seen their resources and organisation boosted by the European Elections; their call to reject the Constitution is well-established in public debate, and potentially attractive for many voters. If between now and the General Election the Constitution's opponents are allowed to maintain, or even extend, their existing organisational and political advantage, any reelected Labour government might well struggle to win a referendum in 2006. Those who want Britain to sign the European Constitutional Treaty have much ground to catch up. They cannot afford to waste the next twelve months.

It may be that in the near future 'Britain in Europe' will emerge as the natural coordinator for all those individuals and organisations working towards a positive outcome of the referendum. In one respect at least, this new task will be more straightforward than Britain in Europe's existing remit. The knowledge that there will be a referendum on the European Constitution and the relative predictability of its date make forward planning much

easier than was ever possible for the eventuality of an ever-receding euro referendum. Much more controversial and complex within the 'Yes' coalition will be the debate over the political message which should underpin its advocacy of the European Constitution. The government has already given us a foretaste of the political rhetoric which it thinks appropriate in this context. It strikingly resembles the rhetoric used so unsuccessfully by John Major after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1991.

Since the Constitutional Treaty was agreed at the European Council in June, Mr. Blair and Mr. Straw have made some muted references to its merits in adapting the European Union to cope with Enlargement. Most of their comments, however, have had a different focus. The Treaty is essentially to be commended because it respects the British 'red lines' and, linked to this, because it marks the end of any prospect of the European Union's developing into a 'European superstate.' Tony Blair's 'red lines' are a post-modernist version of John Major's optouts. But the truly remarkable similarity between these two Prime Ministers ten years apart is in their identical claims to have saved Britain and the European Union from the menace of 'federalism.'

Mr. Major repeatedly insisted that the 'pillar structure' of the Maastricht Treaty was the end of the European federal project. Mr. Blair echoes him by claiming that the arrival of 'new Europe' in the European Union has redressed the balance of 'old Europe,' in a way that will destroy Franco-German federalist aspirations, block the emergence of a European superstate and make the European Union safe for a British electorate suspicious of deeper European integration. History has shown how misplaced were John Major's expectations. The pillar structure of Maastricht was only ever conceived as a temporary arrangement, and it is now being dismantled by the new

Constitution. Events will soon show whether the present Prime Minister's analysis was more solidly based than his predecessor's.

No doubt, as time passes, the government will refine its European rhetoric. Its publicity advisers will rightly insist that a positive message is more likely to mobilise support for winning a referendum than simply negative claims about disasters that have supposedly been avoided. We may expect in due course to hear from the government a more enthusiastic presentation of the Constitution's real merits. But New Labour has already given a hostage to fortune by its loose and opportunistic adoption of the eurosceptic phrase 'a federal superstate,' which it claims to have preempted. The European Constitution does not mark the end of the prospect of a 'federal superstate' because no such ghoulish outcome was ever genuinely in prospect. The Constitution anyway does not fundamentally change the existing structures of the European Union. The government will have great difficulty in trying to explain just what the Constitution has altered in the Union's workings that will now save the United Kingdom from the apparently hideous (but in fact non-existent) menace of a 'European federal superstate.'

In the forthcoming referendum campaign, the electorate will rightly be looking for reassurance from the government that the hysterical predictions of the eurosceptic press about the consequences of the European Constitution are unfounded. It will not in the long term be able to give such reassurance by flirting with the vocabulary and even the underlying political analysis of its eurosceptic opponents. Such triangulation is an excellent tool for winning General Elections. It has the potential to go disastrously wrong in trying to win a referendum.

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