

Quite the opposite

The EU crisis and the Left

The dominant message of the French ‘No’ campaign in the recent referendum on the EU was opposition to an Anglo-Saxon neoliberal Europe, and the Left played a key role in mobilizing a popular movement in towns and villages across France. The Dutch Socialist Party was less dominant in the negative vote in Netherlands, but it was certainly important in rallying much of the Centre and Centre-Left to defend the welfare system against the ravages of a neoliberal European Union. It is therefore not surprising that many on the Left regard the burying of the Constitution as the beginning of a fight-back – an affirmation that ‘another Europe is possible’. I want to offer a cautionary note: the results might be quite the opposite.

The bathwater and the baby

There were two main reasons for the perception that the Constitution reinforced neoliberalism. First, both capitalist market principles and the operating regulations of the European Central Bank are embedded in the Constitution itself. Second, the Bolkestein Directive on services in the internal market, threatening to open up public services to providers from any other member state, coincided with the referendum campaign. Yet the conviction that the Constitution strengthened neoliberalism was a misapprehension in the sense that competitive capitalist principles have *always* underpinned European integration: they were the basis of the Treaty of Rome and have been the ‘hardest’ element in subsequent legislation. With or without the Constitution it will take major political shifts to bring about changes in economic policies; with or without the Constitution, it will require unanimity among the member states to rewrite these principles. The difference is that, without changing the situation in a substantive way, the insistence on proclaiming the whole new treaty as a *Constitution* also constitution-alized the competitive capitalist market. In fact it is the *practice* of the EU that has become more neoliberal since the 1990s, as have the governments in the member states.

There is thus a very significant difference between the perception of the EU by the Left in contemporary France and that of its counterparts in Britain in the late 1980s. When Margaret Thatcher was savaging the British welfare system, Jacques Delors’s ‘social dimension’ was seen as a valuable potential counterbalance to neoliberalism at home. Indeed, this converted many on the Left to the EU – sometimes in an absurdly overoptimistic way. In contemporary France the situation is reversed, with the perception that the domestic welfare system is under attack because of neoliberal pressures from the EU. There is some truth in this, given the current thrust of EU economic policies, although the Chirac–Raffarin government clearly also sought to reduce social protection as part of its own domestic programme. But the central issue is surely that the extent to which the EU promotes economic liberalization, on the one hand, or the ‘social model’, on the other, depends on political pressures expressed primarily through its member states. Those who have greeted the ‘No’ votes with enthusiasm will justifiably argue that the rejection of the Constitution creates an important pressure of this kind. I agree, but remain sceptical as to how significant this is in the overall balance of forces.

A factor of perhaps still greater importance in the ‘No’ votes was a diffuse, but widespread, opposition to the Constitution as a project of the elites. Such attitudes were reinforced by both the process through which the Constitution was devised and by the nature of the final product. Jürgen Habermas, one of the theorists favouring a Constitution for the EU, had seen this as a catalyst for creating a post-national political space through active citizen engagement in the process. However, the Constitutional Convention itself was managed from the top by Giscard d’Estaing, with restricted participation by a male-dominated ‘in-crowd’. Gisela Stuart, who was one of the two representatives of national parliaments on the Praesidium, made the pertinent observation that ‘not once in the sixteen months I spent on the Convention did representatives question whether deeper integration is what the people of Europe want, whether it serves their best interests or whether it provides the best basis for a sustainable structure for an expanding Union’. Furthermore, the result of a process supposedly designed to bring the EU closer to the people was a vast impenetrable document, bearing little relationship to a Constitution. The attempt to ‘sell’ this to the electorates then compounded the problems. In France there was a wholly justified cynicism about the opportunism of Chirac, prompting disbelief in anything he said; and scepticism was also an important factor in the Netherlands, where the absurd attempt of defenders of the Constitution to argue that a ‘No’ vote could lead to a recurrence of Auschwitz and Srebrenica was totally counter-productive. As Fintan O’Toole shrewdly noted in the *Irish Times*:

In the disconnected state of contemporary politics, where trust and admiration are all but gone, saying ‘Yes’ means letting the powers that be get on with whatever they have in mind for the future. It feels, not like active consent but like passive acquiescence. Saying ‘No’, rather paradoxically, feels like a positive act. It creates the temporary sensation that we are taking our collective destiny in our own hands.

Yet if this rejection of elite priorities is quite understandable, there were some positive features in the Constitution, which should be highlighted before it is buried in the dustbin of history. For it reinforced some important political developments within the EU. First, it incorporated the Charter of Fundamental Rights into the treaties. Of course, the Social Rights remain vague and inadequate – partly because the Blair government effectively lobbied on behalf of the CBI to prevent any increase in labour rights. Nevertheless, the Constitution strengthened the legal status of the Charter and it now reverts to its previous position as a non-statutory declaration. Second, the Constitution meant that the EU as a whole would adhere to the European Convention of Human Rights. The exact impact that this would have is difficult to determine, but it implied that the European Court of Human Rights was, in a sense, a higher court than the European Court of Justice. In principle, this could, for example, affect the EU’s treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers. The position now reverts to that in which the member states (all signatories of the Convention) are answerable to the ECHR for their own legislation, but the EU as a collective body is not. Third, there were some small steps in a democratic direction. Under a new protocol, the Commission would be required to send proposals to all national parliaments as well as to the Council and the European Parliament. If one-third of national parliaments challenged any proposal, the Commission would be required to review and possibly withdraw it. This at least raised the possibility of making national parliaments more of a focus for debate and lobbying on EU issues.

Similarly, the position of sub-national government was strengthened by an explicit interpretation of subsidiarity. The Constitution also included a provision for a million citizens coming from a significant number of member states (though the number was not yet defined) to take the initiative of inviting the Commission to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where such citizens thought that legislation was required for the purposes of implementing the Constitution. Since the aims of the Constitution were defined so broadly, this provided some scope for activity to demand socially progressive laws. These innovations now fall, as will a number of other reforms in the institutions and decision-making processes which I would

broadly favour. Yet a far more important cause of my concern about the future is not the fate of the Constitution itself, but the fear that anti-elitist politics may be mobilized by the Right.

A new right-wing anti-Europeanism

While the ‘No’ campaign in France was dominated by the Left, only a bout of collective amnesia could erase the memory of the situation in 2002 when many of the same people were voting for Chirac to prevent Le Pen from assuming the French presidency. The Front National and the forces of the other right-wing anti-EU campaigner, Philippe de Villiers, may have been eclipsed by the Left, but their supporters still contributed significantly to the rejection of the Constitution. Opposition to enlargement, migration and, above all, the possibility of Turkish entry into the EU also played a role. Nor has the Referendum campaign necessarily strengthened the Left, particularly given the bitter division that it caused within the Socialist Party, and it is notable that almost immediately after the referendum both the new prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, and the most popular right-wing politician (and likely presidential candidate), Nicolas Sarkozy, immediately called for tighter immigration controls. Similarly, Chirac himself tried to preclude Turkish membership for all time. The same tendencies are evident in the Netherlands, where Islamophobia has been a powerful theme ever since the rise (and assassination) of Pim Fortuyn in 2002. It therefore seems unduly sanguine to assume that temporary coalitions for ‘No’ votes in France and the Netherlands will necessarily be followed by the development of the Left there. But my anxiety is more general than this.

While both the French and Dutch ‘No’ campaigners insisted that they were not anti-European, but in favour of a different kind of Europe, it is necessary to consider the nature of anti-elitist populism and ‘Euro-scepticism’ more generally. The essence of populism is to mobilize mass support around the claim that the elites care only about themselves and their own political games, and have no regard for ordinary people. In a situation of disengagement from conventional parties and demoralization through economic and social insecurity, mobilization against the EU can be very successful, since



most people know little about it and identify with it even less. It can easily be attacked as a remote playground for the fat cats and, of course, a place where ‘foreigners’ have far more power than ‘our own people’. In the June 2004 European elections such populist parties made gains across most of the EU, including countries that had only joined it the previous month. The key question is therefore not the political composition of the ‘No’ voters in the campaigns that have just taken place, but whether the rejection of the Constitution is going to strengthen negative xenophobic Euroscepticism or those forces that really want to create a different kind of Europe. It may be tempting to say that this is a problem for the elites: they created the kind of societies in which alienation provides the basis for such attitudes so they need to combat this by abandoning the neoliberal policies that fuel support for right-wing populism. I agree, but also believe that the Left has a major responsibility in this respect.

If another kind of Europe is really to be created, it is necessary to go beyond rhetoric by elaborating both a coherent transformative strategy and a goal. And this requires some explicit discussion about the nature of the EU itself. Are we to take this as something that incorporates key values and objectives of the Left, albeit inadequately? Or are we implying that the whole project should be abandoned in favour of something quite different? The latter position makes no sense to me, particularly as the Left has not even reached agreement on the most fundamental questions: for example, the relative importance of the nation-state, on the one hand, and the transnational dimension, on the other, both in terms of strategy and the ultimate goal. While many might now accept a kind of left-wing federalism, this is by no means universal – particularly in France. In my view, it should therefore be stated quite explicitly that European integration has been positive in many respects. Of course, the EU should be attacked for its economic policies, bureaucracy, insufficient democracy, trade and aid policies in relation to developing countries, and ‘fortress Europe’ approaches to asylum and migration. Yet, in a limited but real way, it has also created aspects of a post-national political entity, and a zone of peace from a cockpit of war; and it has established a system of legally enforceable rights that cover areas of employment, health and safety, the environment, and discrimination on grounds of sex, race and disability. All this needs to be emphasized, for if only negative attitudes towards the EU are expressed, the beneficiaries will probably be the populist Right. Nor is it good enough simply to declare that the negatives do not imply opposition to *Europe* itself – the British Conservatives always say this.

Neo-Anglo-Saxon liberalism

It is often argued that the original justifications for European integration can no longer be cited in its support, as these no longer have any resonance. There is clearly some truth in this. Thus one of the most alarming statistics about the French referendum was that the only age group in which there was a majority for a ‘Yes’ was among those over 65. This implies that only the elderly – those who remember the war or its aftermath – identify with the EU as some kind of ‘peace project’. Yet the conclusion that this *raison d’être* for integration is no longer valid is quite mistaken. The point is surely to recall the contribution that it has made – above all in transforming Franco-German relations – and to ensure that it continues to play such a role, both in its ‘near abroad’ and the world as a whole. And there is a latent demand for it to do just this. For when millions of people took to the streets in February 2003 to protest about the imminent war against Iraq, there was widespread condemnation of the fact that such leaders as Blair, Berlusconi and Aznar were siding with the USA, rather than with France and Germany. There was a general conviction that ‘Europe’ should be taking an independent stance – a belief concretized in the appeal by intellectuals organized by Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, and published simultaneously in May 2003 in

Franfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and *Libération*. Public opinion surveys (for example in *Eurobarometer* in 2004) also suggest that there is support for the EU as a potential international actor. The Left should therefore surely be constantly pressing for the EU to become a force for peace-building.

I have one final anxiety about the impact of the ‘No’ vote – that it might have strengthened the very forces that the Left wanted to weaken. Since 1950 the Franco-German relationship has been the motor of European integration. Of course, this has had some negative aspects, including a tendency for these two states to predetermine the agenda and steamroller their agreements into policy proposals. Furthermore, their primacy can cause resentments among the smaller states – a factor in the ‘No’ campaign in the Netherlands. Yet there is also no doubt that the Franco-German partnership underpinned both the European social model and, more generally, European integration as a *political project*. It was both this project and this pivotal partnership that the USA sought to break up before the war against Iraq in 2003, when the Bush administration deliberately sought to fragment the EU. Blair played the pivotal part in this strategy and it is Britain’s role in the aftermath of the Constitution that is now likely to become crucial.

Under both the Conservatives and New Labour, Britain has followed neoliberal economic policies and Atlanticism within the EU. Both Blair and Brown are always keen to lecture their partners on the need to ‘modernize’ their ‘outdated’ and ‘rigid’ welfare systems. Nor have they confined themselves to lecturing, for the Labour government has ensured that neither individual pieces of legislation (such as the working time directive, seeking to proscribe the 48-hour week) nor broad initiatives, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights, interfere with the sacrosanct profit-making prerogatives of business. The aim has been to create a wider and looser Union, and during the Iraq war crisis Blair sought to lead all those within the Union who wanted to undermine Franco-German dominance. Subsequently, the political balance within the EU has been unclear, but it was always evident that the results of the Constitutional ratification process would have great relevance. Had the overwhelming majority of states ratified the Treaty, Blair’s Britain would have been seriously weakened when holding a referendum in 2006, perhaps making it more difficult to promote its policy aims within the EU. With the Constitution in tatters, and with both Schröder and Chirac in very weak positions domestically, the situation has been reversed.

It was in this context that Chirac’s careful plan to isolate the British at the EU Summit on 16–17 June (by concentrating on the rebate) failed. Of course, Blair will have to work hard to restore support from the new member states, which need agreement on the budget to secure essential funding. But of greater long-term importance is the fact that, with a Christian Democratic government almost certain to replace Schröder in Germany in September, Blair is now in a much stronger position to influence the EU towards liberalization, and his carefully crafted speech to the European Parliament on 23 June on the mantra of ‘modernization’ gave a clear indication of the way he would try to do so. Britain certainly cannot *replace* the Franco-German partnership to ‘lead’ the EU, but it can do much to undermine the original integration project by helping to convert the Union into a loose intergovernmental organization, which remains subordinate to the USA and follows increasingly liberal economic policies. Success in these ambitions would prove a major setback for the Left.

No one can blame the French Left for refusing to believe a word that Chirac says. But all those seeking a more progressive EU may come to believe that for once he spoke the truth when he claimed that a ‘Yes’ vote was the best way to guard against an ‘Anglo-Saxon Europe’. If so, one ecstatic moment of voting ‘No’ will have been a disastrous strategy for the European Left as a whole. I hope I will be proved wrong.

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