

Who cares about Europe?



TELLING lies in politics is dangerous, but sometimes the truth is worse. Ask Charlie McCreevy, the European Commissioner who oversees the internal market. Shortly before last June's referendum on the Lisbon Treaty in his home country, Ireland, he told voters that no "sane or sensible person" would read its full text. His remark backfired horribly; many voters thought they had heard him admit that he did not know what was in the treaty.

There is something in what he said. Insanity is a harsh term, but you would not want a dinner-party guest who reads European Union treaties for fun. Much of the EU's business may be important, but it is baffling to outsiders—and very dull.

People in Brussels rarely admit this, but the off-putting complexity of the EU has big political consequences. Proof may be found in research just released by the Irish government, examining why voters rejected the Lisbon treaty. Pro-Europeans have seized on the ignorance of "no" voters: for example, half of them believed the (false) claims of anti-Lisbon campaigners that the treaty would introduce conscription into a European army. But many overlooked a second finding, that "yes" voters were equally confused. Only 18% of those who supported Lisbon said they had a "good understanding" of the treaty. To quote the researchers: the pro-Lisbon vote "was largely a pro-Europe vote", not an endorsement of the treaty's merits.

As Ireland is pressed to hold a new referendum on Lisbon (and to get the answer right this time), the government there has talked about the need to explain the treaty and the EU better. Yet that is undermined by the most significant finding of all in the Irish research: most voters have a limited appetite for information about the EU. A "vast majority" of focus group members—whether they backed Lisbon or not—had no idea how decisions are taken in the union. "Few" thought that, realistically, they would bother to learn more.

This is the key message of the Irish vote. The public does not want to understand the fiendish complexity of the EU. Many in the EU establishment draw a simple conclusion from that: never ask voters directly about something as complicated as a treaty.

They know that many other governments would have lost referendums if they had dared to hold them (instead, the 26 other countries all chose the safer path of ratifying the treaty through national parliaments). The EU establishment takes comfort in the fact that—like Irish "yes" voters—a broad majority of EU citizens have a fuzzy sense that the project is a good thing, even if they have little idea how it works. To many Eurocrats, voter indifference is something to be managed, rather than feared. National health policies are as complex as EU treaties, argues a diplomat, and voters do not expect to understand every detail of how health systems work. This is a tempting argument. But in the longer term, EU leaders are dodging a fundamental question: do you need to seek voters' informed consent for the European project?

The answer must surely be yes. The EU is no longer just a free-trade zone. With the advent of things like EU immigration policies, or extraditions without appeal within the union (via the European arrest warrant), the EU now touches the essential contract between the citizen and the state. Yet the Irish research confirms that the EU is too complex for non-specialists to understand the changes under way.

How, then, can the EU obtain consent? Two answers suggest themselves, both seemingly rather extreme. One involves much more federalism; the other is a strict commitment to keeping the EU as an intergovernmental club, in which national parliaments and national governments are dominant.

It is to their credit that federalists do not think voter indifference to the EU can be ignored. Many say, at least in private, that the EU needs more democratic legitimacy. They worry about the fact that voter turnout has fallen at each European Parliament election since 1979, to 45% last time. They argue that voters must be woken up to the importance of the EU by injecting partisan debate into European politics. In a provocative 2006 book, Vivien Schmidt, a federalist-minded academic from Boston University, called for national politicians to be more honest about how much power has already passed to the EU, rather than “speaking as if they fully retained their former authority”. Others advocate Europe-wide referendums on a single day to pass new treaties, which would be approved by a majority of voters in a majority of countries. Many talk about the need for pan-European political parties, or a bigger EU budget funded by Euro-taxes.

Federalist fantasy

Such federalist proposals are intellectually coherent—and politically doomed. There is no European *demos* and, across 27 member-states, there will never be. For example, centre-right parties in France are far wavier of free trade than the Swedish centre-left. When it comes to views of America or Russia, mainstream voters in Greece or Cyprus have little in common with mainstream voters in Poland or Britain. Passing treaties by pan-European majority votes would be a swift way to break up the EU; what country could tolerate having a treaty imposed on it, if its own citizens had rejected it by a clear margin?

Ireland shows that most voters do not understand the EU, and do not really want to. What they do understand is national politics, and care about who wins national elections. So the only coherent answer to disenchantment with the EU lies in preserving a leading role for national governments and parliaments.

That is not all roses—national politicians are to blame for some of the EU’s worst failures (such as fisheries). But the EU’s best hope of enjoying democratic support for its extravagantly complex workings is a devolved form of consent, channelled through national representatives.

Anything else is neither sane, nor sensible.

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