

A European treaty calls for a pan-European referendum

Published: October 20 2007 03:00 | Last updated: October 20 2007 03:00

From Mr Michele Ruta.

Sir, A large majority of citizens in the five largest European Union member states want a say on the reform treaty of the EU through a referendum ("Call to put treaty on EU reform to voters", October 17). They have all the reasons for such a request, as any extensive institutional reform in the EU will have a large impact on their lives. The question is: should there be a series of national referendums or a single European referendum?

There are two good reasons to prefer this second option. First, experience shows that any national referendum will inevitably focus on contingent national issues rather than the European issue that is actually to be decided. A European referendum will concentrate the debate on the reform treaty itself. Second, and more fundamentally, the decision to be taken is about the future of Europe as a whole, not about individual European countries. Such a decision should be taken by the people of Europe together.

True, a European referendum would present political as well as juridical problems (in this, it is not different from national referendums). However, any juridical problem could be avoided by calling for a consultative referendum. A consultative referendum would not undermine the allotted constitutional role of national parliaments in countries (such as Germany and Italy) where this is a requirement.

The political problems narrow down to two pivotal issues: under what conditions shall the reform treaty be approved? What happens if a majority of citizens in a country votes No in the referendum?

I believe that a European referendum should be judged positive if a double-majority requirement (of EU citizens and member states) is satisfied. This is a principle that is easy to understand for anyone, as it is consistent with the EU as a union of states and citizens. If the No gets a majority in a country, then the other member states should still adopt the reform treaty (provided that a double majority has been achieved in the Union). The country that voted No would have to decide for itself what it intends to do, including the option of a new agreement with the EU as a non-member.

The next elections for the European parliament in June 2009 represent a great opportunity for a European referendum on the reform treaty. It would allow enough time for a proper information campaign and for the various sides in the debate to present their arguments. It is a chance to let European citizens decide on an important aspect of their future.

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