

The end of Europe as we know it? The EU after French and Dutch no-votes

The referenda in France on Sunday and in the Netherlands on Wednesday have thrown the process of ratification of the European Union's constitutional treaty into disarray, and probably damaged it beyond repair. **Stefan Wolff**, Professor of Political Science at the University of Bath, explains the significance of the referendum results and what they mean for the future of the European project.

No amount of glossing over can cover up the fact that the electorates of two of the founding members of today's European Union have decisively rejected current plans for tighter political integration of the now 25 member states. It is true that the French vote had a lot to do with an unpopular government and president, but this is not an argument that explains either the French results in full, nor can it easily be applied to the Dutch case. In France, opposition from the left rejected the constitutional treaty's neo-liberal economic vision; the right resented giving up more sovereign rights to Brussels. In the Netherlands, fears about the future of the particular version of Dutch liberalism, with its tolerance towards soft drugs and gay marriage, and about the decreasing influence of the Netherlands as a small member state in a seemingly ever further enlarging European Union played a significant role in making roughly two-thirds of people vote no after around two-thirds of members of the Dutch parliament had voted in favour of the constitutional treaty.

Just a few months ago, it looked as if supporters of the constitutional treaty would just scrape through everywhere in the EU, the only big question mark being the UK. This calculation has proved seriously wrong. While no-campaigners across the EU celebrate the French and Dutch votes as their victory too and EU crisis management and damage limitation is in full swing, the Labour government in Westminster appears likely to put plans for a UK referendum on hold, for the

time being at least. This will essentially mean a stop to any positive campaign in support of the constitutional treaty, a treaty that the Prime Minister after all helped negotiate and presented as a resounding success for all those who wanted to see a strong Europe of nation-states.

But it is not only Blair's political instinct that a referendum might have been very hard to win—there is a fundamental problem with the current stage of European integration, and 'profound questions', as Jack Straw put it, are indeed raised by the double rejection in France and the Netherlands. These are about the leadership style of national and European politicians, their obvious detachment from public opinion and their inability to convince people of the need for this constitutional treaty, they are about what the people of Europe expect from the EU, and they are about how the EU wishes to position itself vis-à-vis its member states and the rest of the world.

These are not easy questions to answer, but they have to be addressed. The simple reason is that, contrary to many of the popular myths surrounding the EU, it is not a conspiracy devised by an aloof elite of Brussels-based bureaucrats to aggrandize and enrich themselves. The tighter economic, social and political integration and several waves of enlargement (after all, the EU once started as a modest club of six member states) are in many ways necessary responses to outside pressures. To state the obvious, globalisation will continue whether there is an EU or not, but few if any of its member states will be able to influence the direction or shape the outcome of it on their own. An EU of 25, or even 30 members speaking with one voice can get its citizens better deals in global trade, manage immigration more efficiently, and, above all, protect its people with greater effectiveness from the negative consequences of globalisation, including international terrorism.

Does the rejection of the constitutional treaty mean the end of an EU being able to do all of this? Not necessarily. Regardless of whether there will be a re-negotiation of the treaty—which is very unlikely—or a salvage operation for its less controversial elements—which is more likely, for example, in the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy—the EU can and will continue to function on the basis of existing treaties while it is searching for answers about what went wrong with this attempt to achieve a compromise between different visions of the future of Europe. The constitution may be dead in the water, but the EU is not...nor should anyone who cares about the future of Europe and its people wish for it to be.