



Prodi tells MEPs - Europe's future is at stake between now and the 2009 European elections

Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi told MEPs that Europe's future is at stake between now and the 2009 European elections in a debate in the European Parliament in Strasbourg. MEPs expressed diverse views from pressing on with much of the existing Constitution, to a smaller Treaty, to advocating no change to the status quo. Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende will address the Strasbourg Parliament on Wednesday at 3pm.

The debate on the future of Europe with Romano Prodi, Prime Minister of Italy and former President of the European Commission, was introduced by European Parliament President Hans-Gert **PÖTTERING** who emphasised the challenges facing the EU and the need for successful reforms. Mr Pöttering pointed out that 18 countries had ratified the treaty. He welcomed the support being given by Italy to the constitutional process and stressed that "it would be a misinterpretation of the people's will" to respond to the two failed referendums with a solution that "limits democracy and transparency in the European Union".

Romano **PRODI**, Prime Minister of Italy, expressed the firm view that "Europe's future is at stake between now and the 2009 elections". He disagreed with those who contrast "the need to achieve results" with "the need to enhance European institutions", saying "It is to achieve results that I have always wished and worked for stronger and more effective common institutions!"

He argued that: "In the last two years, only the hesitations have been heard". It was now time "to listen to those who ratified the 2004 Treaty". He saw overcoming the constitutional impasse as the EU's "top priority".

In pushing ahead with European integration, "we always have to make efforts to understand the views of others, to take them on board." But, he went on, "we expect the same attitude from 'the others'. We expect them to take on board our wish for a more closely integrated union".

It was important that, in 2009, European voters should know, for example, what the European Parliament's role and tasks would be. For this reason, the mandate of upcoming Intergovernmental Conference on the constitution must be "specific and selective". It must focus on "the few significant points at issue" and the need for solutions.

Italy's sticking points

Since Italy had supported the current text of the Constitutional Treaty, we "cannot now accept radical changes", said Mr Prodi. Key points to be preserved were "the strengthening of foreign policy and common security by means of a European Foreign Minister,

a stable Presidency of the Council, the extension of qualified majority voting, the abolition of three-pillar structure, the Union's legal personality".

He also wished "to warn against the appeals to 'realism' usually issued on the eve of an important European Council, which are invariably linked to minimalist solutions". In fact, "the only true realism is to build a Europe able to keep up with challenges" he emphasised.

These challenges included, at domestic level, the European social model and the creation of a European space of freedom, security and justice; in foreign policy, fighting international terrorism and global challenges of energy and climate change; and, for the sake of clarity and public understanding - the abolition of the three-pillar structure. On all these points, said Mr Prodi, "the 2004 Constitutional Treaty gives convincing answers".

A "vanguard" as the last resort?

But what can be done if the 27 Member States cannot agree? For Mr Prodi - though he did not welcome the idea - "we do not necessarily have to proceed all together at the same speed. Already now, some significant European projects, such as the euro and Schengen, have been implemented by only some Member States. Not 'against' anybody and not to 'exclude' anyone, but always keeping the door open".

Therefore, said Mr Prodi, on the one hand "Italy will give the fullest possible support to the German and then the Portuguese presidencies". However, if the resulting agreement does not convince Italy, "we will not sign it". In which case "a vanguard of countries could be the best way to proceed towards a more integrated union, on condition that the door remains open to those countries willing to join later".

In the end "We must be aware that we cannot fail", otherwise Europe will decline and "risk reverting to being the small western appendage of the Asian continent".

Political group speakers

For the EPP-ED group, Joseph **DAUL** (FR) told the House that because of a range of issues, from climate change to the talk of a single immigration policy, "European integration is speeding up". After a long hiatus the constitutional issue was coming back into focus. Fortunately the newly-elected French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, had been given a mandate for change, and it was important to build on this "new dynamic".

The key questions to be settled were double majority voting, wider use of qualified majority voting, subsidiarity, a stable presidency, a single voice on the world stage and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The EPP was keen for Europe to act together on economic and trade issues and to prevent unfair competition between Member States, especially on taxation. "Pragmatism must win out over dogmatism".

Turning to the EU-Russia summit, he said it should not be seen as a "failure" as some thought. On the contrary, the EU had "stood up for its convictions and ideals" notably on Estonia, Kosovo and energy.

Lastly, his group wished to stress "the importance of the Mediterranean dimension". This would "decide the success or failure" of the European project and it must be seen as a "major strategic priority".

For the Socialist group, Martin **SCHULZ** (DE) said he had nothing to add, as Mr Prodi had expressed exactly the opinion of his group. "If you take that clarity to the negotiations, then at least there will be one strong head of state or government who is not prepared for compromise at any price, as this would be a defeat for the work for European unity." Mr Schulz referred to the experience of his colleague Paul Nyrup Rasmussen, now an MEP sitting next to him, but in 2000 Danish Prime Minister and thus a participant at the Nice summit. He said all the leaders had left the summit saying that the Nice treaty was not enough to make enlargement work. It had been a minimal compromise, but they had agreed to create the Convention to make rules really suitable for a Europe of 27. The Constitution was a good text, but it was rejected – OK, said Mr Schulz, but did that mean that what was true in 2000 was no longer true? "We have gone through enlargement with an insufficient basis. To continue in this way would destroy Europe," he warned. He stressed that countries representing more than half the EU's population had ratified the treaty: "That is

the truth of European democracy.”

The EU had a successful model, he said, achieving peace, social stability, and economic growth and was now able to export its values to the international sphere. To maintain that success, meant major changes to the existing treaties, he concluded, using the words of Lampedusa “Everything must change in order for everything to stay as it is.”

Graham **WATSON** (UK), leader of the ALDE group, began by saying to the Italian Prime Minister: “Welcome back. You have returned Italy to its rightful place at the heart of Europe.” Despite doubts from some commentators, Mr Prodi had led the Commission which brought both enlargement and the introduction of the euro, both major successes, said Mr Watson, and already under his premiership, Italy had led the European force into Lebanon while others hesitated, and pressed for a moratorium on the death penalty. Europe's future, he said, led not in insulating itself from external injustice, but from exporting its domestic achievements of the last 50 years. There was no better model than the Community method for creating consensus. He agreed that Europe's leaders needed self belief, grit and determination to face the future.

“We need more Europe, not less as the key to competitiveness, more Europe not less to obtain security and more Europe not less is the key to a just world.” Only strong institutions, he concluded, could build a stronger Europe.

Speaking for the UEN group, Cristiana **MUSCARDINI** (IT) said it was urgent to adopt a new treaty which would make the EU simpler and easier to understand, but the text should not be too general and ambiguous. Citizens wanted something realistic and pragmatic. “Without new choices we won't make progress. We need the right solution at the right time.” A high level compromise can be what works, she added, listing priorities including more respect for sovereignty, action against terrorism, for competitiveness, for more mobility, for the social model and a common approach to legislation on crimes against children. “People won't trust governments who say one thing in Brussels and another at home,” she said. EU policy on immigration was confusing, and immigrants themselves were the first to suffer from this, she said, but this had not been resolved, partly because the Italian government could not agree on its own line. Fewer words were needed, she concluded, and more action.

Monica **FRASSONI** (IT), speaking for the Greens/EFA group, said that experience has shown that those who say 'no' were often the most vociferous. There was no way that the Greens/EFA group could accept a compromise in a "downwards direction". Ms Frassoni insisted that national parliaments should play a role in the EU constitutional process. The EU had to face up to public opinion and build public support rather than getting involved in "internal machinations". Any debate on the Constitution should be held in open.

Speaking for the GUE/NGL group, Francis **WURTZ** (FR) said that even by simply changing the terminology away from the word "constitution", it would be necessary to consult the people. Even liberal economists, he said, wondered what the consequences would be of "unfettered globalisation". Mr Wurtz also called for a statute for the European Central Bank.

Mr Wurtz also questioned what role politics and political institutions had to play in facing up to the challenges of economic globalisation, a question he said, that was "never answered" by any of the other leaders. Finally, Mr Wurtz said that Mr Sarkozy had to slim down his ambitions for Europe in order to get support from the French people.

Nigel **FARAGE** (IND/DEM, UK) began by saying that Prime Minister Prodi, in his "usual rousing style" had "confirmed [his] belief in a United States of Europe."

Mr Farage made reference to the recent arrest of former KGB agent Andrei Lugovoi for the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, and referred also to Mario Scaramella, the academic who met with Litvinenko on the day he was poisoned. Mr Farage said that the Italian academic "tried to warn Mr Litvinenko of what would happen to him" but had "languished now in an Italian jail for six months." Mr Farage asked: "If you're suggesting we give up common law and habeas corpus for that sort of European system, my answer to you is no thank you."

Concluding, Mr Farage said of the future of the Constitution: "Let the people decide on their own future, don't impose it upon them."

For the ITS group, Jean-Marie **LE PEN** (FR) said that the Sarkozy's victory in the French presidential elections "means that the EU constitution is back on track." Mr Le Pen said that in rejecting the Constitution, "the French people also rejected the institutional part that people are trying to get us to swallow today", which would lead, he continued, to "a European bureaucratic and omnipotent superstate." Mr Le Pen added that Sarkozy was the favourite for the European Parliament "because he will ensure that the constitution will be ratified by Parliament rather than in a referendum." By supporting the constitution, "Sarkozy is betraying the 55% of French people from the Left and the Right who voted against the constitution."

The Constitution is "a document which is very difficult to understand", said Jana **BOBOŠÍKOVÁ** (CS) for the Non-attached Members. It was, she continued, "penned by people engaged in social engineering" and has "given rise to unnecessary dispute and conflict." Mrs Bobosikova added that the ongoing debate on the future of the Constitution in Europe "reminds us of how small are the mental horizons of its leaders who still haven't realised that this is dead in the water." Such a debate, she concluded, serves only as "a very good opportunity to learn from our failures."

PM Prodi - Response to the debate

Responding to the group leaders Prime Minister **PRODI** said the debate had been "brief and constructive", illustrating the fact that there were very divergent views on the way forward. Due to this divergent views, the EU needed strong rules, he said. It was paramount to reach a new compromise although Prime Minister Prodi underlined that the draft Constitution itself was a compromise. "It was signed by all the governments of the EU, including London". "We have to again achieve a compromise but not as the risk of destroying Europe, that is the red-line." Prime Minister Prodi said that Europe needed a European Foreign Minister given Europe divisions on foreign policy in the past. "We have responsibilities to ourselves and our children", he concluded.

British Speaker

Timothy **KIRKHOPE** (EPP-ED, UK Conservative) said: "We are once again debating constitutions and institutions when the citizens of Europe are really more interested in jobs, prosperity, the environment and global poverty. It is a myth that the European Union is in a crisis or paralysed and incapable of taking decisions, and this is the pretext that some governments are using to demand that the Constitution should be back on the table, and I know that you, Prime Minister, believe this as well.

It is not a constitutional crisis. Even the British Government has said that the EU is able to take decisions based on current treaties, and the period of reflection following the French and Dutch 'no' votes should, in my view, have been used to take a long, hard look at the reasons for the rejection of the constitution. Instead, the discussions now seem solely focussed on what parts of it can be kept at all costs."

As someone who believes in my nation's membership of the European Union and the potential for good that Europe possesses, I am saddened by this debate. I have always believed there was a need to simplify and make more transparent the decision-making processes and institutions of Europe, as the Laeken Declaration envisaged. The enlargement of the EU may, indeed, require some amendments to existing treaties or new treaties from time to time, but I cannot accept that this Constitution is required, nor is it desirable at this moment. There is no doubt that the British people will demand a referendum on any new treaty that might propose additional powers for the EU, and my party would support that. We will watch with great interest the actions of the British Government in the weeks to come. Mr Blair will attend the Brussels Summit on the very eve of his retirement and he must not commit his successor in his absence. Gordon Brown should insist that he attend the summit alongside Tony Blair and take full responsibility for whatever his Government signs up to.

I hope that this kind of realism will guide Mr Brown's actions in the difficult times that lie immediately ahead."

Contact :**Richard FREEDMAN**

E-mail: press-EN@europarl.europa.eu

BXL: (32-2) 28 41448

STR: (33-3) 881 73785

PORT: (+32) 498 98 32 39

Jack BLACKWELL

E-mail: jack.blackwell@europarl.europa.eu

BXL: (32-2) 28 42929