

# The cliché of premature demise

by Richard Corbett MEP

**It's become something of a cliché, but ever since the demise of John Cleese's famous parrot we Brits have had a distinct tendency to write things off prematurely. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in European politics.**

Those of us who have been around a while remember the nails being hammered into the coffin of the Maastricht Treaty after it was rejected by Denmark—only to discover that not only was it possible to rescue the agreement, but that the Danes could be reassured without changing a single word of the treaty text. And when the Exchange Rate Mechanism collapsed, common wisdom in this country insisted that monetary union was effectively dead. In fact, a year before the introduction of the euro it was hard to find a single commentator in the UK who would predict anything other than early collapse for the fledgling currency. But, of course, the doomsayers were wrong.

It's too early to say what fate now awaits the proposed new European constitution, which would have consolidated the EU's present mass of overlapping treaties into a single document. The fact that its content has been already approved by a majority of member states makes the most doom-laden predictions implausible, and indeed several more countries are continuing under the original timetable. Cyprus, Malta and Luxembourg have since ratified the treaty, while Estonia and Belgium continue to pursue their own procedures.

Meanwhile, other countries have suspended ratification and European leaders have agreed on a "period of reflection". All well and good—but this period has begun without any agreed focus, nor with any mechanism foreseen for eventually drawing it to a close. These must come, because one thing is certain: whatever happens to the treaty, the problems which it set out to address will not go away, and we sidestep them now at our peril.

It's true that nobody wants to talk about the constitution at the moment; there are other, more immediate concerns to worry about. Fair enough. But EU reform can't just be brushed under the carpet. Nor would we want to. So where do we go from here?

Well, it's striking that our debates so far have focused not so much on the text of the Constitution as on the wider context of the European Union—where it is now, where it's going, and how it should handle the challenges that it currently faces.

This is to be welcomed, not least because these same issues also dominated debate before the referenda in the Netherlands and in France, and to a degree in other countries. If these wider issues of context are sorted, it will make it easier to then move on to consider particular aspects of the treaty text itself.

A number of these issues spring to mind. The controversial Services Directive, intended to liberalise the service industry across the EU, featured enormously in the pre-referendum debates. It's crucial that we reach a balanced and agreed solution on this issue and dispel many of the fears that it has stirred up so far. Similarly, issues surrounding the medium-term budget—including the perennial debate on the British rebate, stoked up most recently by President

Chirac—simply will not go away. Questions of economic reform, CAP reform and possible EU enlargement have also dominated debate on the constitution in many countries.

Only once these problems of context have been solved—or at least addressed, so that progress is made to reassure concerned citizens—will it be time to decide what to do with the text of the constitution itself. Here, the range of possibilities is very broad, and none is without difficulty.

In the long term, it's conceivable—though optimistic—that the current text could be salvaged, perhaps with protocols appended to address specific concerns. Another option is to rewrite parts, or to annex new protocols and declarations to clarify controversial areas. Alternatively, perhaps a number of smaller treaties could be enacted to implement separate aspects of the constitution's planned reforms. Equally, some uncontroversial aspects of the constitution, such as the requirement for the Council of Ministers to debate new laws in public, could be put in place without treaty changes — though, relatively speaking, these provisions are not the most crucial ones and not very numerous.

The desirability of these options varies, and much will depend on other aspects of the context, such as potential new governments in France, the Netherlands and elsewhere. But standing still is not an option. We cannot abandon reform. Wherever we go from here, it must be in a direction that maintains and improves the EU as a democratic, responsive and efficient way of addressing the common challenges of our continent. Only then can the Union can continue to earn the majority support from citizens across Europe which it has enjoyed since its inception.