

# Root and branch reform

by Richard Corbett MEP

**The decisions we take at European level affect us all. The agricultural sector is no exception.**

In fact, the European Union spends more of its budget on supporting and developing agriculture than on any other area of policy – so the quality of EU decisions matters here even more than most.

And these days every farmer is also a businessman or woman. Whether it's health and safety law, environmental policy or free trade across the single market, it's now with our neighbours around the table in the European Union where we agree many of the common rules which structure how our businesses operate in the twenty-first century.

A long overdue root-and-branch reform of the CAP is already underway, but there's an even more fundamental area in need of attention: the EU's decision-making mechanisms themselves. With 25 countries now around the table in the newly enlarged Union, there's a real danger that decision-taking will become gridlocked or, at the very least, slow and cumbersome.

That's why a new rulebook is needed. The 25 governments have agreed on a new constitutional treaty for the EU, replacing the current constitution, a dozen overlapping treaties. This new document brings in a number of improvements.

First, it streamlines the decision-making process and the institutions involved. There's a single chairperson for the European Council, replacing the current six-monthly rotating presidency. There's a limit to the size of the European Parliament and a reduction in the size of the Commission. And there's more majority voting for the Council in day-to-day areas of policy, though the national veto is preserved for the more sensitive areas.

This greater effectiveness is balanced by greater safeguards. All EU laws will be subject to the prior scrutiny of all national parliaments, and, with a few exceptions, the dual approval of both national governments and the directly-elected European Parliament. This is a level of parliamentary scrutiny that exists in no other international structure.

And all parts of the EU's budget will be brought under the direct control of elected MEPs, again ensuring greater accountability and openness. Notably, this includes the field of agricultural spending for the first time – an area which has previously been ring-fenced by ministers, with decisions taken behind closed doors, but will now be brought into the spotlight of fully democratic scrutiny.

Finally, the new constitution provides greater clarity about the Union's nature and objectives, spelling out clear limits to its responsibilities and preventing it ever from becoming the dreaded superstate. This is a clarification that benefits all of us.

Meanwhile, it's also interesting to note what doesn't happen in the final draft. There's no loss of national veto in any sovereignty-sensitive areas – tax, social security, foreign policy, and so on – while the key gut issues of national politics remain completely outside the EU's remit (such as

schools, the NHS, and direct taxes). No new responsibilities are passed to the EU, and there's no grand centralisation, as our own House of Lords points out in its own report evaluating the constitution.

The constitution also re-emphasises the principle that the European Union only acts where its members agree that action at national, regional or local level would be insufficient. In other words, all decisions should be taken as close to the citizen as possible – locally where possible, centrally only where necessary.

All in all, this new constitution embodies an important set of improvements to the way the EU is organised. And that's why, at the end of the day, it's crucial that the debate is based on simple facts. If the facts are allowed to prevail – no matter how loudly the anti-Europeans can shout – I firmly believe that the new constitution deserves our wholehearted support.

**Richard Corbett is a Labour MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber. He is co-author of the European Parliament's official report on the new EU constitution, endorsed in January by a majority of MEPs, and is the spokesperson on EU constitutional affairs for the Labour Party and the wider Socialist Group in Parliament.**