

A fanciful set of horrors

by Richard Corbett MEP

It's sad that the debate about the European constitution in Britain is couched in the usual hyperbole. The Tories and eurosceptic parts of the press are conjuring up fears of a centralised superstate and calling it “the end of a thousand years of British history” – making it more significant, presumably, than the Norman Conquest.

It's time to start responding vigorously to this nonsense. Any objective analysis of the proposed new constitution shows that it contains a set of modest but worthwhile improvements. They can be grouped into three headings: tidying up, streamlining, and improving democratic accountability.

- The **tidying up** consists of replacing the complex and overlapping set of EU treaties (which make up the existing EU constitution) with a single more readable document spelling out clearly the powers of the EU and their limits. The new constitution will also replace the confusing double structure ‘European Community’ and ‘European Union’ with a single legal entity. It will replace jargon by more easily understandable terms (for instance, EU directives will be called ‘EU framework laws’, which is, after all, what they are).
- The **streamlining** is part and parcel of making sure that the EU functions well with 25 or more countries. It will minimise gridlock by providing for most Council decisions to be by Qualified Majority Voting – with exceptions in sensitive areas such as tax, social security, foreign policy and defence. It will merge the two posts of Foreign Policy High Representative (currently Javier Solana) and the Commissioner for External Relations (currently Chris Patten) into a single ‘foreign minister’, ending duplication and confusion and providing a focal point for external representation of the Union on those subjects on which we have a common policy. It will also allow the European Council (the three-monthly meetings of Prime Ministers) to choose a 2 ½ year chair to replace the current 6-monthly rotation.
- **Democratic accountability** is improved by providing that the adoption of all EU legislation will be subject to the prior scrutiny of national parliaments and the double approval of both national governments (in the EU Council) and directly elected MEPs – a level of scrutiny that exists in no other international structure. EU institutions will also be obliged to conform to agreed standards with regard to fundamental rights. The European Parliament will elect the President of the Commission.

Yet, out of this reasonable set of proposals, the eurosceptics invent the most fanciful set of horrors.

They claim that it involves transferring vast new responsibilities from national to European level. But, unlike previous treaties, the text does *not* envisage any significant expansion in the EU's field of competence. The EU remains a union of member states who themselves determine its powers.

There will be no change in the nature of the European Commission. Its job will still be to make proposals and carry out what is agreed. It's not to become an all-powerful central government, and it remains small. (Yes – contrary to perceptions, the Commission has fewer employees than Leeds city council!)

The eurosceptics claim that the term 'constitution' implies that the EU is a state. But many international organisations, like the World Health Organisation, have constitutions. Nobody ever thinks they're states. The Conservative Party itself has a constitution, as does my local golf club – neither of which have aspirations for statehood, as far as I know. The term simply means 'rulebook'.

Eurosceptics claim that the proposed 2½ year chair of the European Council amounts to an unelected 'President of Europe', although the job description specifies that (s)he is chosen by the Prime Ministers to prepare and chair their meetings, with no decision-taking power – just replacing the current six-monthly rotation of the chairmanship.

They even object to long-standing features of the EU, such as the fact that EU law supersedes national law – but this has been the case since before Britain joined. It just means that countries should stick to what they agree in the EU. This is the very principle we relied on to win our case against France on their refusal to accept British beef. How could it be otherwise? Do the eurosceptics actually want a country to be able to agree one thing with its neighbours and then do another?

At a time when we should be celebrating the truly historic accession of the former communist countries to our family of peacefully co-operating nations – such a contrast to so much of our history – we in Britain are set for arcane debates on wilfully misleading interpretations of obscure institutional points.

People just aren't turned on by arguments about institutions. One of the reasons for having the new constitution is to provide a lasting settlement of these issues. If it fails to be adopted, we can look forward to several years of bitter wrangling on the future structure of the enlarged EU. That might keep those politicians happy who make their careers out of euroscepticism – but it's hardly a prospect for the rest of us to relish.