

[salt&pepper] – Inside the sausage factory

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EUOBSERVER / SALT&PEPPER - Laws are like sausages, said Bismarck. You don't want to watch them being made. But following the progress of the European constitutional convention has really been rather instructive.

The conduct of the preparatory work for the forthcoming Inter-Governmental Conference (for that is what the convention is) has been so much more interesting than from its predecessors, such as the Dooge Committee before the Single European Act or the Westendorp Group in the run-up to Amsterdam. Some of the most profound issues of modern politics have found an airing here, even if only briefly so far.

I have heard complaints about the Convention that nothing has really happened yet. The crucial and fundamental changes that need to be made have not yet been made. We are still waiting for some important decisions and compromises.

Convention bell has sounded

But the Convention is like a 10,000 metre race. The runners go round and round the track 24 times and nothing really seems to happen, but then the bell goes as they enter the final lap. Suddenly they speed up and start jockeying for position at the front of the pack. Everything that matters happens at the end. With the publication of the first draft of the institutional proposals by the presidium, the Convention bell has just sounded.

There has been such an impatience to get on with the decision-making that people have seized on the first proposals to emerge and given them elevated importance. Of course, the reason they have been published first is precisely because they are not very important.

Increasing the role of national parliaments in EU legislation, for example, is treated as if it is the single solution to popular disconnection from Europe. If that were really true, national parliaments would already be reconnecting citizens with their national governments, but that isn't something we observe in practice. There is an important role for national parliaments, of course, controlling the actions of their national representatives in the Council of Ministers, but that is relatively unglamorous so that national parliamentarians are less interested in it.

It finally took the proposal to create a permanent chair of the European Council to kick-start the debate on the future of the institutions. The important issues were finally in the open and the subject of debate.

And the whole notion of consensus started to break down. The presidium voted – for the first time – on a proposal to be put to the Convention. The language used by participants in the debate suddenly became more committed. "Autistic," said Elmar Brok of the permanent chair proposal. The European Commission had "strong reservations" (that's tough language by Commission standards).

This is great. This is exactly what we have been waiting for.

One of the problems with Brussels is that everyone is too polite too much of the time. People are reluctant to express their disagreements.

Maybe they fear they have misunderstood something, working in a second or third language or relying on a rather uncertain translation. Maybe they are over-compensating for the different cultural traditions and business habits present. Maybe they think that the spirit of Europe means agreeing with each other all the time. Whichever, it is time that people starting

speaking their minds.

Flaring tempers

After all, this is one of the reasons behind the repeated (and misplaced) demand that the European Commission must be independent. No-one is yet sure that the Europeans are capable of having arguments with each other. So it is a positive sign in the Convention when tempers start to flare.

The most serious discussion is still to come as the Convention enters its final phase. Nothing will be agreed until everything is agreed. Not only is there still time to take decisions; that decision-making time has in fact barely started. Nobody makes concessions and compromises until it is really necessary. The debate in the Convention was never going to be won by force of argument alone.

So those like me who have high expectations of the Convention should not panic. We need not give up hope just yet. No-one wants to eat an undercooked sausage, do they?

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