

A British letter to France: vote for Europe

► Neal Ascherson

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As the French prepare to vote on the European Union constitution, a group of thirteen writers, politicians and constitutional experts in Britain follow the example of their Polish and German counterparts by urging a "yes".

There is much talk in Britain of the advantages of a "no" to the European Constitution in the French referendum on May 29. Many suggest a rejection would be fortunate for Tony Blair, suddenly freed from the embarrassment of a British referendum which could turn out to be a dismal humiliation. To ask, and worry about, what it may mean for the wider picture is regarded as unsophisticated.

Let us be unsophisticated for a moment. All across Europe we have just laid wreaths and shaken veterans' hands to mark the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. That, and the war which preceded it, are the essential inspiration for the historically unprecedented way of living together as peoples which is the European Union.

The survival and political health of such a structure is a serious matter. We now take it for granted. But the Union is fragile and great political chances can be lost for a lifetime, and sometimes for ever. Rejection of the Constitution could prove fateful to a Union which, for all its deficiencies, is a beacon of peace, prosperity, and good political sense throughout the world. It has helped to establish free and stable societies among its neighbours, and is still doing so in countries traumatised by half a century of totalitarianism.

The Constitution seeks to bring together the agreements which have underpinned the European Union since the first Treaty of Rome in 1957 and it does more than that. It enshrines citizens' rights, adds provisions to make the newly-enlarged Union more democratic and effective, and carefully balances the EU social model with the flexibility needed to compete in a globalised market.

We hope the French people will vote yes in the referendum on May 29. It will greatly encourage us, their fellow-Europeans, to campaign at home for the same result.

Neal Ascherson; Christopher Bobinski; Richard Corbett (MEP, Labour spokesman for EU constitutional affairs); Brendan Donnelly (president, Federal Trust); Andrew Duff (MEP, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, constitutional affairs spokesman); Sue

Garden; Timothy Garden (Liberal Democrat defence affairs spokesman): Kirsty Hughes: Will Hutton: Richard Laming (director, Federal Union): Phillip Souta: Edward Steen: Zygmunt Tyszkiewicz.

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