

A few thoughts on the Lisbon Treaty

Chris Davies MEP

The Irish Referendum

The Irish have voted by more than two to one in favour of the Lisbon Treaty, and the Europhobes in the Conservative Party, UKIP and the BNP are furious.

Personally I am delighted. It's time to move on, make the changes that are needed for the EU to function more effectively, and spend more time dealing with the problems that face us all.

This is my testimony as to why this Reform Treaty is a positive development, and my response to some of the arguments that its fierce critics mount against it. You may be able to use some of them yourself

I've tried to keep it short, and I hope you find it of interest.

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Why Do We Need A New Treaty?

You hear a lot of nonsense about the European Union. Europhobes claim that 'it' or 'they' want to dominate and control. But the European Union is nothing more in essence than a mechanism that allows 27 democratic governments with shared values to work together and take decisions about issues of concern to all.

Arrangements that worked just about adequately when the EU only had 15 Member States are hardly good enough now there are 27 of them. The sheer size, and the need for consultation on everything, means that everything takes much longer. A new treaty is needed to make things work quicker and maybe better.

The EU's role has grown bit by bit. Governments have come to recognise that they need to do more together and various treaties containing new ideas have been added from time to time. Each one has been ratified by every national parliament. The idea grew that perhaps it was time to start afresh and create a new 'Constitutional Treaty' that spelt it all out in simple language (well, as simple as intergovernmental treaties are ever likely to get!).

As we know, this was defeated after referendums in the Netherlands and France. But the governments still knew they needed better working arrangements so the Reform Treaty was prepared and they signed it in Lisbon. Although the changes it makes are very similar to those in the "Constitution" its legal structure is completely different. Instead of being a bold new document it is simply an updated version of the old treaties with lots of amendments.

What's In The Treaty?

I've read the Lisbon Treaty; it takes about 6 hours to do so. The first section commits the European Union to stand up for good principles like freedom, justice and the rule of law, and says that any Member State has the right to leave the EU if it wishes to do so. The rest of it reads like a dictionary or a set of standing orders. There are lots of separate sections on bodies like, for example, the European Court of Auditors. The Treaty sets out their purpose, how they will be appointed, and how they will conduct their business. A riveting read it is not, but it is necessary. It lays down the rules.

The Treaty says that every Member State will nominate one European Commissioner. It changes the balance of votes in the Council of Ministers (representing the 27 governments) and says that a decision can

only be taken if it has the support of 55% of governments representing 65% of European people. It also gives the Council a permanent President to sit alongside the rotating presidencies that alternate between countries every six months, and the 'High Representative' on foreign policy will sit in the European Commission as well as reporting to the governments. Most national vetoes have already been removed but one significant change is that the Treaty extends majority voting to the field of justice and home affairs (eg. measures to fight cross border crime and to develop a common approach to immigration, but NOT borders control). It gives the European Parliament a new role in helping to make agricultural, fisheries and trade laws.

It says that government ministers must meet in public when discussing proposed new EU laws. It requires the European Commission to reconsider proposed legislation if seven or more national parliaments object to it. It says that every person in the EU is a European "citizen" and as such has the right to certain freedoms. It sets up a European diplomatic service so that we can share costs by having joint embassies in some places (but it does NOT force any country to close the ones it has already).

The Treaty does NOT extend EU powers into new areas. It does NOT give the EU power to set taxes, social security or pensions. It does NOT allow the EU to interfere in national health, education or policing arrangements. It does NOT insist that countries must provide abortion on demand. It does NOT create a European army, or introduce conscription, or force any Member State to change their foreign policy. It WILL allow a majority of EU nations to agree a "European" policy, but the other Member States can still take a dissenting position if they wish.

The Treaty is useful, but its strongest supporters tend to exaggerate its importance, and its opponents hugely exaggerate the degree to which it changes things. The EU works best by consensus, when all governments are in agreement, and the best thing that can be said is that the Lisbon Treaty will probably encourage governments to do more to try and make the compromises necessary to reach agreement.

Is It Democratic?

Every single democratically elected government in the European Union says that it wants the Lisbon Treaty. Every single one of the 27 democratically elected parliaments has voted in favour of it. When the Tories and UKIP say that it is "undemocratic" just what do they mean?

I've heard the Europhobes claim that Ireland has been forced to vote again because it got the decision wrong first time around. But I've also heard the response of one Irish Minister who said that he had been happily married for 35 years old but his girlfriend had said 'NO' the first two times he had asked.

And I liked the comments of Irish MEP Sean Kelly who delivered a great put down to UKIP in the European Parliament. Describing their comments about Ireland as "condescending" he said: "Ireland has not been FORCED by anybody to vote a second time. It was a decision independently taken by the Irish Parliament. We haven't been FORCED to do anything since we gained our independence from Britain in 1922!"

Two obstacles remain to adoption of the Treaty. Although both the Polish and the Czech Parliaments have endorsed it, the Presidents of both countries have still to sign it as Heads of State. The former is expected to do so quite soon, but Václav Klaus is a strong opponent of the EU so who knows?

This is the great hope for UKIP and the Conservatives – that one individual will defy the will of his country's own parliament and every other parliament in the EU. Not the greatest example of democracy!

What's The Alternative?

I am suspicious of those who are so keen to have a referendum (and personally I have NEVER publicly supported the idea of a referendum on this issue). I don't like the fact that the easiest argument in any referendum campaign is to tell people that "if you don't know, vote NO." Very few people have read the Lisbon Treaty, and why should they? Elected representatives are supposed to do that sort of work and to vote accordingly.

The truth is that the Europhobes don't care too much about the details of the Lisbon Treaty; they just want a chance to vote against the European Union.

They say: "we just want a free trade area with Europe." It sounds simple, but it's the most naive statement imaginable. A free trade area DOES exist, it's called the European Economic Area and Norway, for example, has access to EU markets without being part of the EU's political structure. But the price Norway has had to pay is to adopt thousands of EU laws about common minimum standards that it has had absolutely no part in developing. This is why Norway is so often described by its own politicians as a 'fax' democracy, because instead of making and shaping EU laws in Brussels they stand by the fax machine in Oslo waiting for them to emerge!

This is the "independence" that the Europhobes want for Britain, and it's a mirage. They think of themselves as patriots, but the reality is that they are traitors who would undermine Britain's opportunity to shape Europe-wide policy and specific laws that will inevitably become the standard for the whole continent because they are the ones to which multinational companies will adhere.

End Note

Put simply, I think the Lisbon Treaty is a good thing. I want a stronger European Union. And I want an EU that lives up to high principles and values.

Just to finish I attach a few extracts from the opening articles of the Lisbon Treaty. Have a read – not many people have done so.

Remember, the Conservatives, UKIP and the BNP are wholly opposed to this. Maybe that explains a lot about why so few readers of this e-mail support them.

The Lisbon Treaty - Excerpts

GENERAL PROVISIONS

3) The following Article 1a shall be inserted:

‘Article 1a

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy,

equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.’

4) Article 2 shall be replaced by the following:

‘Article 2

1. The Union’s aim is to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples.

2. The Union shall offer its citizens an area of freedom, security and justice without internal frontiers, in which the free movement of persons is ensured in conjunction with appropriate measures with respect to external border controls, asylum, immigration and the

prevention and combating of crime.

5) Article 3 shall be repealed, and the following Article 3a shall be inserted:

‘Article 3a

1. In accordance with Article 3b, competences not conferred upon the Union in the

Treaties remain with the Member States.

2. The Union shall respect the equality of Member States before the Treaties as well as their

national identities. It shall respect their essential State functions, including ensuring the territorial integrity of the State, maintaining law and order and safeguarding national security. In particular, national security remains the sole responsibility of each Member States.