

'LET THE PEOPLE HAVE THE FINAL SAY' ON NEW EUROPEAN TREATY - TONY BLAIR (20/04/04)

Event: Statement to the House of Commons

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Speaker: Tony Blair

With your permission Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the forthcoming negotiation over the new European Treaty. In parallel, the Foreign Secretary is publishing today a White Paper on Europe.

On 1 May the EU will enlarge from 15 to 25 members. It will be the biggest ever increase in Europe's size. It will reunify Europe after the travails of Communist dictatorship in Eastern and Central Europe. It is an historic event, one this British Government and the one before us have championed. Whatever the problems it poses, and we see that in the anxiety over prospective immigration, let us be in no doubt: the prospect of EU membership, together with the courage of the Governments concerned, is the primary reason why those countries have been able to reform their economies and politics so radically and so beneficially. Such change has been in the interests of all of Europe. I say unhesitatingly that enlargement is right for Europe and for Britain and this country should support it.

In addition, Bulgaria and Romania are set for membership in future years, taking the numbers then to 27. And Turkey is now making extraordinary strides forward in democracy, human rights, in economic change, in the resolution of the conflict in Cyprus, strides that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago, and all under the impulsion of future EU membership.

So within the space of a few years Europe will be transformed. It will be easily the strongest political union and greatest economic market in the world. Britain should be at the heart of it. That is its right and its destiny.

Because of enlargement, Europe is sensibly seeking to change the way it works. In a Europe of 25 or 27 or 28, a rotating six month Presidency makes no sense; the use of the veto should be confined to the areas where it is truly necessary, otherwise decision-making becomes paralysed, and in certain areas, terrorism, security, economic reform, the environment, Europe must do more and do it better.

The new Constitutional Treaty is designed both to answer the challenge of enlargement and also to bring together in one Treaty, what is presently found in two separate treaties. Indeed, a significant part of the new Treaty is a repetition of articles already in force.

I want to make clear in this negotiation that Britain will co-operate fully in helping Europe work better; but work better as a Europe of sovereign nation states. There are certain areas of policy where maintenance of control of our affairs is essential. In

those areas like taxation, foreign policy, defence, social security, how the essentials of our common law, criminal justice system work, like Treaty change, we believe the national veto must remain. We will insist on the necessary amendments to the present draft Treaty to ensure beyond doubt that they do so. On this basis the Treaty does not and will not alter the fundamental nature of the relationship between Member States and the EU.

The new Treaty then would take effect, after ratification by all Member States probably in 2007, with certain key provisions in 2009. Until then, the key provisions of the Nice Treaty will remain in place.

If the new Treaty contains these essentials, we believe it is in Britain's interest to sign it. It will replace the six month rotating Presidency with a full-time Chairman of the Council - a vital step away from Federalism, enabling the Council, which is of course the repository of the individual Governments, to become the body that sets Europe's agenda. The new Treaty for the first time will allow National Parliaments the right to object to Commission proposals for legislation, a big advance in subsidiarity. It adds a greater ability to co-operate in areas like terrorism and cross-border crime that are crucial for the world in which we live. It gives a bigger role for enhanced co-operation between some of the member states, where not all of them wish to participate in certain areas.

This is what the Treaty, if amended in the way we seek, will actually do. Ever since its inception, however, the myths propagated about it have multiplied in those quarters, political and media, who we know are hostile not just to this Treaty but the whole notion of Britain playing a central role in Europe.

For example:

That the EU will be renamed the 'United States of Europe'. No it won't. It is to remain the European Union.

That The Queen, for example, will be replaced as our Head of State by an EU President of the Council. In fact, we already have a President of the Council and always have had.

Or that Britain will be forced to join the euro, without a referendum and regardless of our economic tests being passed. No it won't. The existing agreements on the single currency remain in the new Treaty.

That Britain could not mount a future Falklands War or Iraq campaign without permission from Brussels. Yes we could. Defence is to remain unanimous and the prerogative of the nation state.

That we will lose our seat on the UN Security Council. No such provision exists.

That Brussels will seize control of our oil supplies. No it won't and the Treaty will make that clear.

That Brussels will have the power to set taxes in Britain. Taxation is to remain with the nation state.

That our Foreign Policy will now be decided by the EU because the new Treaty obliges Member States to support Europe's CFSP 'in a spirit of loyalty and mutual

solidarity'. Actually these words are taken from the Maastricht Treaty and in any event CFSP is decided unanimously.

That we will surrender control over our borders. It is already agreed that our right to control our borders, secured by this Government in 1997, will be specifically retained in the new Treaty.

That the assumption of 'innocent until proven guilty' in British law will be scrapped. No such provision exists.

All this and many others like the hardy perennials about being forced to drive on the right, the Germans taking over our nuclear weapons and no doubt the shape of our bananas too.

Even yesterday, we had the Right Honourable Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition asserting that if this Treaty were in place, I would be unable as British Prime Minister to go to Washington to talk to President Bush.

All of it, nonsense, myth designed to distance people's understanding of what Europe is about and loosen this country's belief in its place in Europe.

It has been an unrelenting but, I have to accept, partially at least, successful campaign to persuade Britain that Europe is a conspiracy aimed at us rather than a partnership designed for us and others to pursue our national interest properly in a modern, interdependent world. It is right to confront this campaign head-on.

Provided the Treaty embodies the essential British positions, we shall agree to it as a Government. Once agreed, either at the June Council which is our preference, or subsequently, Parliament should debate it in detail and decide upon it. Then let the people have the final say.

The electorate should be asked for their opinion when all our questions have been answered, when all the details are known, when the legislation has been finally tempered and scrutinised in the House, and when Parliament has debated and decided.

The question will be on the Treaty. But the implications go far wider. It is time to resolve once and for all whether this country, Britain, wants to be at the centre and heart of European decision-making or not; time to decide whether our destiny lies as a leading partner and ally of Europe or on its margins. Let the Eurosceptics whose true agenda we will expose, make their case. Let those of us who believe in Britain in Europe not because we believe in Europe alone but because, above all we believe in Britain, make ours.

Let the issue be put. Let the battle be joined.
