

THE MALTESE REPUBLIC BECOMES THE TWELFTH MEMBER STATE TO RATIFY THE EUROPEAN CONSTITUTION

On 6th July the Republic of Malta became the twelfth Member State to ratify the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe.

The sixty five MP's, comprising the Chamber of Representatives, the single Chamber of Parliament, voted unanimously in favour of the text. The motion voted by MP's indicates that "*Malta believes that the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe bears witness to the reunification of Europe, a Europe of people and States, a Europe built via a process over fifty years on values of peace and prosperity.*" The text also refers to Malta belonging to "Europe's Christian heritage."

On 17th October last the President of the Republic Eddie Fenech Adami (Nationalist Party) excluded the organisation of a referendum. According to article 66 of the Maltese Constitution the treaties are ratified by the vote of at least two thirds of MP's i.e. 44. On 8th March 2003 the Maltese accepted their country's accession to the European Union by referendum (53.65% in favour, 46.35% against; the participation rate was at 91%).

Europe has over the last few years divided the country's two main parties, the ruling Nationalist Party (MLP) and the Labour Party (LP). For a long time the latter was against the archipelago joining the European Union, pleading in favour of a partnership with Brussels that would provide Malta with the status of associate State enabling it to maintain its privileged links with the USA and above

all with Libya. In 1996, the Labour Party leader, Alfred Sant, then Prime Minister, also stopped the archipelago's candidature to the European Union when he took office. After the accession referendum on 8th March 2003 Alfred Sant, challenged the election's validity maintaining that "*the yes vote did not comprise the absolute majority of the voters registered.*" According to him 142,000 people voted in favour of joining the European Union i.e. less than half of the 297,000 voters registered. One month after the referendum the Maltese accepted the confirmation of their desire to integrate the European Union by voting (51.7% of the vote) in favour of the Nationalist Party (versus 47.6% for the Labour Party) during the general elections on 12th April.

On 2nd and 3rd July last, a few days before the parliamentary ratification of the European Constitution, the Labour Party met and decided by a wide majority (82%) to vote in favour of the European text. The thirty one Labour MP's followed their 34 Nationalist counterparts and it was therefore unanimously that the Maltese Parliament ratified the treaty. Prime Lawrence Gonzi (MLP) welcomed an "historic day" emphasising the importance of the vote and the fact that for the very first time, the two Maltese political parties shared the same European vision. "*From the most divided country over the European Constitution we have become the most united on this subject – which is a victory for the whole of Malta,*" declared the Prime Minister.

"This new chapter offers a number of opportunities to the Maltese. Malta believes that the constitutional treaty is a vital tool for an enlarged Europe to operate efficiently in an increasingly competitive world," declared Lawrence Gonzi to Parliament. For his part the Labour opposition leader Alfred Sant believes that Malta had to express itself about the text. "*We cannot allow the other*

countries to decide for us,” he maintained. “The ratification process of the Constitution should not be stopped just because two States have voted no. Malta has the right and the duty to express itself on the text independently of the decisions taken by other states,” added the Prime Minister.

To date thirteen States have ratified the European Constitution: Lithuania (11th November), Hungary (20th December), Slovenia (1st February), Spain (20th February by referendum), Italy (6th April), Greece (19th April), Slovakia (11th May), Austria (25th May), Germany (27th May), Latvia (2nd June), Cyprus (30th June), Malta (6th July) and Luxembourg (10th July by referendum). France (29th May) and the Netherlands (1st June) rejected the treaty by referendum.

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