

Blair has lost his way

By Will Hutton

Europe's Downer 2.5.04

THE Europe has a problem, one which has been getting worse for almost two decades. Having started as a customs union, member states embarked in 1986 on a far more ambitious project. Under the single European Act the former Common Market began its slow transmutation to a jointly-governed but distinctive political entity. But what this new European Union has never achieved is democratic legitimacy.

The European Parliament — the means to that end — is self-evidently too weak. The only way in which the European Parliament could be more powerful would be for national parliaments to become less so. They, naturally, jealously protect the status quo. Yet there is another, more ingrained, cultural weakness. Outside Strasbourg and Brussels, no one thinks in terms of European-wide socialism or European-wide conservatism, an essential pre-requisite for creating any European democracy worth the name.

Citizens of European countries simply do not think in terms of European-wide parties which can act or argue on their behalf or who they can canvass for support. Even a European intellectual community is only in its hesitant infancy. The means to transform Europe to more than a common market do not yet exist — although I am sure, one day, they will.

This is the background against which the coming referendum on the EU constitutional treaty is

afterwards to show solidarity; but we had to stand with the Europeans over invasion.

This was a chance to do what was right and demonstrate the advantage of a solid European alliance. Tony Blair took the soft option, and is now locked in an inexorable political logic that could ultimately weaken Britain's relationship with Europe to mere associate level, or even lead to our leaving the EU.

This would be a tragedy. There are strong reasons for Britain to want more than a common market like the rest of Europe, and to try, in the process, to create the European public realm we currently lack. We share, despite a multiplicity of languages and histories, the same core values — a belief in the social contract, an adherence to the idea of the importance of the public realm and shared views that capitalism must be fairly run.

In an era of globalisation these can best be defended collectively. We have common interests,

But while plebiscites have the advantage in an era of democratic disengagement of directly involving the citizenry in political debate, they have the disadvantage of being rather crude — with the results inherently manipulable by those who control the media. Mussolini and Hitler used referendums because the fascist state had a complete media monopoly and thus the vote could be guaranteed. Today, the Orwellian enemy is not state control of our thinking and debate; it is unaccountable Big Press.

What looms is not government by the people through their parliaments; it is government critically influenced by the private owners of newspapers in an environment where they can more or less say what they like about anything with little come-back, and which in a single-question plebiscite will determine the answer. Money rather than argument or evidence will govern opinion.

In this context pro-Europeans have to be ruthless. Tony Blair has led the Labour party for 10 years this June, and despite promise after promise — the most recent being the non-existent roadshows to explain the benefits of the euro — he has consistently ducked developing an agreed pro-European narrative and insisting that his senior ministers campaign on it.

Briton needs idealism, political flair, charm and a sense of a new beginning to win — all qualities Gordon Brown has in abundance. If Blair stands down and Brown leads a broad-based pro-European coalition, dropping his recently acquired euro-sceptic mantle, the pro-camp might just have a chance — which is what British progressive politics and Europe alike both need.

Euro-scepticism, not just in Britain, is fed by the new sense of nationalism and the confluence of ugly sentiment around asylum-seekers, immigration and race; instead of confronting and moulding it, Blair has again chosen to accommodate and thus legitimize it — so helping to create a culture in which Express proprietor Richard Desmond feels able to make the remarks

constitutional treaty is going to be fought — an uphill struggle for the pro-side even if the debate were to be fought by political Queensbury rules. To have any chance, we pro-Europeans have to get our story straight, build as broad a coalition as possible that spans parties and interest groups, and be led with consistency and conviction. Even then it would be hard. The YouGov poll in the Sun with only 16 per cent in favour of the treaty indicates the scale of task.

Here's the rub: it cannot be done with Tony Blair as prime minister — as the sceptics know and a growing number of pro-Europeans are coming to recognise. For we start at this low ebb largely because of where his ambiguities and incoherencies have led us. A genuine pro-European who understood both British national interests and the over-riding necessity to sustain multilateralism would not have pre-emptively invaded Iraq without a second UN resolution — even if subsequently justified by finding weapons of mass destruction.

We could have backed the US with a powerful contribution to reconstruction and policing

not least in each other's prosperity (on which our own is often dependent). The European street, as has been vividly demonstrated over Iraq, has similar attitudes and interests in foreign policy — a commitment to the rule of international law and a suspicion of American unilateralism. We are all Europeans now — we just don't yet have ways of expressing it.

The recourse to referendums has been inevitable. Democracy in the West is becoming more biased towards direct democracy by plebiscite and referendum and away from traditional forms of representation. It's the story in California and Holland alike, now pledged to hold its first-ever European referendum.

In Germany, 92 per cent of the population think they should be consulted in a referendum on the new European constitutional treaty. In Britain, referendums have legitimised devolved assemblies and directly-elected mayors. With Big Press and the Conservative Party pressing for a referendum, resistance would have been impossible. Blair should have made his now infamous U-turn months ago.

he did about Germans being Nazis.

Too much political capital has been consumed; too little trust remains. Blair cannot lead the pro-camp to anything other than defeat. If he wanted to dispel the myths about Europe, he should have started years ago — and acted to build a pro-European constituency.

We need idealism, political flair, charm and a sense of a new beginning to win — all qualities Gordon Brown has in abundance. If Blair stands down and Brown leads a broad-based pro-European coalition, dropping his recently acquired euro-sceptic mantle, the pro-camp might just have a chance — which is what British progressive politics and Europe alike both need.

Without it we pro-Europeans must put up the best fight we can, but in the spirit of the doomed defenders of Dunkirk knowing a winnable battle may lie years ahead. Perhaps this is the way we build Europe - losing battles, winning others later - and the process being the route to construct a European public realm and deeper European roots. Any which way, let's roll.
—*Dawn/Observer Service*