

## ***Do you speak European?***

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A cliché has been shattered. European citizens are extremely interested in Europe and have clear ideas regards to how it should be and are able to speak as Europeans, not only as citizens of different countries. Tomorrow's Europe is proof of this; this deliberative poll® involved a sample of representatives from the EU's 27 member states and swept away the stereotypes closing their eyes to a public sphere that exists and wishes to make its own voice heard. "It is impossible to put together people speaking so many languages and who are so different; European policies are too difficult and complex to arouse the interest of common citizens; Europeans in reality do not exist, they do not share EU policies, hence the EU is a matter for politicians and bureaucrats". These are the clichés on Europe totally neutralised by the *deliberative poll*®: and this is how it happened.

In the midst of the European Babel, the solution is called simultaneous translation. A sample of representatives consisting in 362 participants was able to express themselves in 22 different languages. The organisational effort was immense (and also expensive; the entire operation cost about 1.4 million Euros) but the results were excellent. In the hemicycle of the Brussels parliament an entire wall was reserved to the cabins used by the translators who worked for the entire three days of this event. Technology rose to the occasion and the Babel vanished in the headphones of each participant. Little did it matter if the speaker was speaking in Finnish, English, Greek or Hungarian, the words became understandable to anyone listening in the room. And in group sessions this became even more sensational because one could follow lively and participated debates around a table at which the Dutch, the Latvians and the Portuguese sat together with Italians, Rumanians and Slovenians.

In writing about Tomorrow's Europe in The Guardian, Timothy Garton Ash <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,2193268,00.html> quoted words by John Stuart Mill who wrote that if there is not fellow-feeling among people, especially if they speak different languages, it is impossible to achieve a degree of public opinion necessary for ensuring that democracy works. In Brussels Stuart Mill's words became fact.

In fact, thanks to linguistic understanding, starting with exchanged opinions, reciprocal understanding was achieved on many subjects, however difficult and complex these may have been.

Pensions, the labour market, energy policies and nuclear threats were discussed with determination and without timidity allowing the emergence of a reasonably outlined vision of the EU, its role and its future. Basically, at the end of the deliberative poll®, the participants asked for a Union capable of addressing important issues in greater depth, capable of providing itself with

the means to be active and concretely present on the international stage and not attempting further enlargement at any price.

As emphasised by James Fishkin in analysing the poll's results, through debates and exchanges of opinions, this *deliberative poll*<sup>®</sup> has created the conditions for bringing to the surface a sharing of a vision of the EU that belongs to European public opinion, on condition that its members are able to speak to each other and express themselves.

Those who believe that European issues are only chatter for elites, would do well to watch the footage of the plenary sessions held in the hemicycle of the Brussels parliament. There is useful information there. They will see European citizens proposing a concrete vision of Europe, expressing their requirements as far as the EU is concerned. One can also see politicians changing the manner in which they express themselves; faced with questions posed by Europeans they are obliged to abandon all elusive circumlocutions with words and concepts to address the heart of the matter directly.

This is a *deliberative poll*<sup>®</sup>: if a citizen poses a question to a politician in front of the entire assembly, the politician must answer with facts and arguments, otherwise he will hear the words: "I am sorry Honourable Member of Parliament, but you have not answered my question. Why is the EU not represented within the UN Security Council? What are the dangers if a large and vastly populated country such as Turkey or the Ukraine should become a member of the Union?"

This was how European public opinion took shape in front of all those present in Brussels between October 12<sup>th</sup> and October 14<sup>th</sup> 2007. The internet keeps alive and documented this experience and those who wish to can see European citizens obtaining information, debating matters and reaching decisions. One can see politicians pressed by simple voters; ordinary people who wished to know and understand.

European public opinion has spoken, but understanding whether and how European institutions will take into account the decisions that emerged at the end of the poll remains a mystery. During the closing press conference, Tommaso Padoa Schioppa, president of Notre Europe, which sponsored the entire initiative, said: "Europe's future depends on the capability of our democracies to evolve towards broader spaces". More efficient and broader democracies. The efficiency of democracy certainly requires public opinion to play an active and participated role. It requires politicians to listen to what public opinion has to say. Will European politicians be capable of implementing their good intentions and listen to the questions posed by the European public sphere?