

EU citizens to gather for Brussels brainstorm

11.10.2007 - 17:34 CET | By Honor Mahony

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS – Fifty years after the creation of what has become today's European Union, one of its abiding problems remains that it is not really any closer to understanding what citizens across its 27 member states really want from it.

Now a pioneering project this weekend in Brussels will explore this question with around 400 citizens coming from all four corners of Europe.

The aim is to create the first "European public sphere" with pan-European political discussion hampered by national and local politics, different cultures and traditions, as well as a myriad of languages.

Stephen Boucher from Notre Europe, the pro-Europe think tank behind the project, says "healthy deliberation underpins a healthy democracy."

People need to "exchange arguments to determine how they can live together in harmony."

The participants are aged between 18 to 88 and range in jobs from taxi drivers, to doctors, barmen, teachers, housewives and students. The discussioners will arrive in Brussels tomorrow – among them some who have never left their home country before – and spend Saturday and Sunday debating issues such as pensions, jobs and global security.

James Lysan (20), a contemporary performance student from the UK, says he is "not a huge follower of politics" but was "happy to give [the discussion] a shot."

In his opinion, Europe should concentrate more on fighting issues such as "world hunger" rather than climate change.

When asked what Europe means to him, Mr Lysan says he sees it as a group of countries "all aiming towards one goal."

For Frank Corleis (35), a civil servant from Germany, it is important that "Europe can speak with one voice in different areas [such as] human rights, climate change issues or defence."

He adds that he does not have so much contact with Brussels and he is looking forward to the weekend discussion as a chance to talk about international and Brussels-related issues "with other interested Europeans."

For its part, Notre Europe points out that only one in ten Europeans has ever discussed Europe with citizens from other EU countries.

While Mr Boucher concedes that this may not be "all that surprising," he says that is not a reason to do nothing about it.

He also notes that the most important element, and where there could be "surprises", will be to see whether people's opinions changed after they have "had time to consider matters."

Mr Boucher says he hopes the weekend's debate will "generate discussion" among EU policy-makers.

The premise for the project – known as deliberative polling – is that the normal method for gathering opinions from citizens a yes/no or tick-the-box survey is not nuanced enough.

James Fishkin, the US professor who masterminded deliberative polling in the early 1990s, believes it is the answer to the EU's democratic deficit – the cumulative effect of using votes in European elections for domestic issues; low voter turnout at European election time and a lack of pan-European debate.

He sums up the technique on Notre Europe's website: "There is a basic, and recurring problem of public consultation-if we ask elites, we have deliberation without political equality. If we ask the people directly, we can have political equality but usually without deliberation."

The results of the deliberation are to be presented next week just before an EU leaders summit.

Whether it will be noticed by the European Commission is another matter. But Brussels has been paying more attention to citizens since they turned EU politics on its head two years ago by voting against its most ambitious project yet – the European Constitution.

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Printed from EUobserver.com 12.10.2007

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