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Never mind the treaty squabbles. Europe's real problem is Babel

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The chief lesson of a unique polling project is that the EU's greatest worry is not Brussels - it's 23 different languages

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As the leaders of the European Union gather under the dome of the Atlantic Pavilion in Lisbon to thrash out the last details of that pesky treaty, the one thing you can be sure of is that the ordinary people of Europe will be beyond the security cordon, outside the dome. Should we not let the people speak? The people of Europe, I mean, not just the people of Britain, Ireland or France. To adapt GK Chesterton's famous poem about "the secret people":

Smile at us, pay us, pass us;

but do not quite forget.

For we are the people of Europe,

that never have spoken yet.

But how would the people of Europe speak? What would they say, and in what language? Is there a "people of Europe" at all, as opposed to many different peoples? Last weekend, a unique attempt was made to start answering these questions - and early results have been made available to this column. The thinktank Notre Europe, founded by Jacques Delors, got together with Stanford University's professor James Fishkin to conduct the first deliberative poll of Europeans debating their union.

First, they did a regular opinion poll of a representative group of 3,500 EU citizens. Then a fair sample of 362 from that larger group came together for a long weekend in the building of the European parliament in Brussels. These were not the prime ministers, lawyers and officials closeted in the Lisbon dome - the kind of people the British cartoonist Michael Heath captured in his strip, *The Suits*. No, these were Marco, a 24-year-old ambulance driver from Marseilles, Marino, a 53-year old school attendant from Gallipoli, Katerina, a sales rep from Plzen in the Czech Republic, Michael, an estate agent from Nenagh in Ireland, and so on. (You can see some of them on tomorrowseurope.eu.)

Europe's secret people, who never have spoken yet, were polled again as they came in. They were fed lots of information. They were divided into groups that debated topics such as pensions, Turkey and foreign policy, interspersed with plenary sessions addressed by experts and Euro-luminaries. Trained moderators facilitated the multinational discussion groups. At the end of the weekend, they were polled once more, and we can see how their views changed. This is the essence of the technique of deliberative polling, developed by Fishkin, which attempts to restore something of the interactive quality of ancient Athenian democracy - citizens arguing in the public square - to contemporary polities.

What made this one more difficult than all previous deliberative polls was less the logistics than the linguistics. One achievement of European integration is that travelling around in the EU is almost as easy as it is in the US. The difference is what happens when you get to your meeting place. In Washington, you debate in one language; in Brussels, at least 22. (Strictly speaking, there are 23 official languages of the EU, but this time no one insisted on barding in Gaelic.) So one of the discussion groups had Dutch, Latvian and Portuguese as its working languages, with simultaneous interpretation provided, another did battle in Greek, French and Spanish, a

third debated in Italian, Romanian and Slovenian. A European parliament insider said he had never seen the interpreters working so hard. Back in the plenary session, in the large, modern, light-wooded hemicycle of the parliament, members of each group came up to the podium to ask an agreed question in their own language, then scuttled back to their seats to catch the interpretation of the debate through earphones. Interpretation and translation costs amounted to £175,000 for just one weekend.

Here is the real obstacle to Europe-wide deliberative democracy. It's not the famous Brussels bureaucrats. It's not the way decisions are made in the EU, which includes only a small dose of direct democracy (the role of the European parliament) but a large measure of indirect democracy. Basically, the key deals are hammered out by representatives of democratically elected national governments, with the European commission and the parliament giving some distinctive European input.

That has always been the case, and it will remain so under the new treaty, although a few more decisions will be subjected to majority voting - itself hardly the most undemocratic principle. The negotiators may indeed be smooth men in suits working behind closed doors in smokeless rooms, but they none the less represent democratically elected governments.

Yet apart from the debates of the European parliament, ignored by most European citizens, there is no public deliberative democracy, no equivalent of national political controversies, no mass, continent-wide conversation - or, in a more portentous jargon, European public sphere. Except about football - and more recently, Madeleine - the pan-European conversations are generally elite conversations. And the biggest single reason for this is quite simply that we speak and think in so many different languages. The heart of Europe's democracy problem is not Brussels, it's Babel.

So what happens when you equip the Tower of Babel with simultaneous interpretation and fill it with a representative sample of EU citizens? What happened last weekend was that people went in with quite widely differing views and came out, after two days of informed debate, with views somewhat closer together and significantly changed on a few issues. For instance, they emerged more ready to accept a rise in the retirement age, to fund the pensions of our ageing populations, but less keen on taking Turkey and Ukraine into the EU. The largest shifts came among people from the new member states - that is, mainly the central and east Europeans who joined in 2004. At the beginning of the weekend, nearly four out of five "new" Europeans said Ukraine should join, at the end only half of them did. The same shift occurred, though a bit less dramatically, for Turkey. That's bad news for Turkey and Ukraine, and for those of us who believe that the EU would ultimately be stronger with both of them in, but it rings true.

More interesting than any individual result is the experiment itself. "Among a people without fellow-feeling," wrote John Stuart Mill in his *Considerations on Representative Government*, "especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist" (my italics). This, not any mind-numbing minutiae of a treaty, is the European challenge: to create fellow feeling while still speaking different languages. Some countries do it: India, for instance, or South Africa. I will never forget sitting in the visitors' gallery of the South African parliament and listening to MPs speaking in Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans or any other of the country's 11 official languages - sometimes with evident mutual incomprehension. But South Africa is a country, with a flag, a constitution, an anthem and, most important, a rugby team. Europe will not be a country.

Still, perhaps we might think of having a rugby team. Imagine: Sébastien Chabal erupts out of the ruck and passes the ball to Jonny Wilkinson, who kicks the winning drop-goal for Europe. That'll be the day.

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