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

Timothy Garton Ash

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

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
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