

Civil Society and the Convention

Enhancing Public Awareness

The Convention devoted to the reform of the European Union has been meeting for more than four months, but hardly anyone has taken any notice of it. The current Eurobarometer poll shows that 64% of EU citizens have never heard of the Convention. And only 25% have any faith in its proceedings. This demonstrates that the Convention is the least trusted of all the European institutions. However, less than a year remains in which to win the trust and attract the attention of EU citizens with regard to the work of the Convention. Appropriate measures need to be implemented forthwith.

Organised civil society represents a pivotal link between the Convention and EU citizens. The internet makes it possible to participate directly, as is demonstrated by the submission of numerous suggestions relating to all of the topics being discussed by the Convention. Many interest groups in their capacity as civil society representatives were heard in the plenary session of the Convention on 24 and 25 June 2002. However, these two forums are not enough. What was heralded in Nice as “a broadly-based discussion about the future of the EU” and in Laeken as “a comprehensive debate and participation of all EU citizens” must now, in the framework of the Convention, continue in the shape of an ongoing dialogue with European civil society. The seven contact groups currently in existence - social sector, environment, academia and think tanks, citizens and institutions, local authorities, human rights, development and culture - are not the right setting for this. In the plenary session organised civil society representatives naturally demanded that their specific interests should be taken into account, for example, in the areas of environmental and social policy, and called for a far greater involvement of their respective institutions in the integration process.

The question of EU foreign policy will be discussed at the next meeting of the EU Convention on 11 and 12 July 2002. We have already presented strategy recommendations on this subject area in Convention Spotlight 2002/02. See also the current Convention Praesidium discussion paper CONV 161/02.

In future effective and appropriate civil society involvement should take its bearings more directly from the actual work and thematic structures of the Convention. For this reason

- the current contact groups should be replaced by new cooperation structures which take their bearings from the subjects assigned to the Convention's working groups and
- there should be direct networks and complementary agreements between the Convention's working groups and civil society contact groups, perhaps in the shape of joint meetings or hearings devoted to specific issues.

The contact groups should then include all of the interest groups which are in a position to make a specific subject-related contribution to the working groups. In this way it will be possible to achieve an ongoing and precise exchange of ideas until the conclusion of the Convention. Permitting civil society groups to speak on one occasion would, it is true, be in compliance with the Laeken declaration in formal terms, though it would mean missing out on its strategic potential. The Convention's busy schedule means that a dialogue with civil society represents additional work. However, the effort would certainly be worthwhile.

- Firstly, civil society representatives can do valuable "translation work" for the Convention as it draws up a draft constitution. For many years European policy debates have demonstrated that the kind of language which sounds like specialist jargon can make participation difficult. The strong point of language is its ability to create identity and thus to encourage connection and linkage. In this regard civil society involvement will help to prevent confusion when it comes to terms and concepts that EU citizens can understand.
- Second, organised civil society will have a crucial role with regard to transmitting the results of the reform process to the wider public. Its willingness to assume such a communicative function and to seek approval of the results presupposes a deep involvement in the negotiating process.
- Third, the final document of the Convention will have to be acceptable to the European heads of state and government. Ongoing civil society involvement will give the work of the Convention additional legitimacy. If the result is based on double legitimacy and authority - namely, that of the Convention and of European civil society - the catalogue of demands will become a sine qua non of the intergovernmental conference.

Thus civil society has a pivotal role as a communications interface. However, it has been prevented from playing this role effectively by a virtually insurmountable barrier. This is the result of the very large number of documents which have been submitted by both members of the Convention and civil society groups. Insufficient resources make it impossible to take into account and evaluate all the contributions in the course of the Convention's proceedings. There is a danger that many important suggested solutions and innovative ideas will be lost. It is obvious that the Secretariat of the Convention with its limited staff and budget cannot manage to structure the wave of documents. For this reason additional resources must be made available on the EU level, and, if necessary, evaluation should be carried out by academic or similar institutions.

After a lengthy period of listening, the Convention is now embarking on a phase of specific work. This could well provide a boost with regard to public awareness. The main thing the Convention lacks in order to attract public attention is specific templates for a European basic treaty. There can only be a political debate after diverging options and models have been made public. However, this is not yet the case, and thus neither civil society nor the media have been able to publicise them. The Convention should now seize the opportunity to prepare the way for a broader public debate. Civil society should continue to be involved in the process in an ongoing manner, so that in the end the results of the consultations - in the best-case scenario a basic or constitutional agreement for Europe - can be transmitted to EU citizens from both sides, that is, from the political level, and by civil society representatives. In this way it will be possible to achieve more than would be the case with classical intergovernmental cooperation.

The Editorial Team