

THE NATIONAL DEBATE IN THE UK

INTRODUCTION

The Treaty of Nice called for “deeper and wider debate about the future of the European Union” and invited Member States to launch a wide-ranging consultation. This paper, submitted by the British members of the Convention representing the UK Government and Parliament, outlines the public consultation that has taken place in the UK so far and the main issues that have emerged.

GOVERNMENT ACTIVITY

The British Government has sought both to promote and explain the work of the Convention and the issues involved in the Future of Europe through its public diplomacy activities. It has encouraged decentralised participation from a variety of actors. Activities and initiatives have included:

- Speeches by prominent members of the Government, such as the Prime Minister’s keynote speech on the Future of Europe at Birmingham in November last year. Also, two key speeches made by the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw: the most recent at The Hague ahead of the Convention’s inaugural meeting; the other entitled “A Europe for its Citizens”, made in the UK last July. Both speeches addressed the problem of disconnect between the EU and its citizens and suggested some solutions. The Minister for Europe and Convention member, Peter Hain, has also made a series of visits around the UK, promoting debate on the Future of Europe.
- The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) website (www.europe.gov.uk), which receives approximately 10,000 hits every month, has hosted an on-line Forum on the Future of Europe and, as well as providing information about the Future of Europe debate and the Convention, has allowed members of the public to participate in on-line debates. They can also send their comments directly to Peter Hain.
- The FCO has produced leaflets and newsletters for distribution across civil society which have been sent to MPs, MEPs, libraries, academics and European Resource Centres, who then provide them to schools on request. Recent publications include: “The EU: What’s in it for you?”, “EU Fighting Crime and Promoting Justice” and an edition of an EU newsletter.

PARTICIPATION BY THE DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- The Foreign Secretary and Minister for Europe maintain regular contacts with Ministers from the Devolved Administrations, frequently discussing the Convention and issues linked to the Future of Europe.
- The Government is committed to informing and involving all levels of government in the Future of Europe debate. Central and Local Government meet regularly to discuss the Convention and draw up joint positions, where possible, through the Central Local Partnership. A conference dedicated to local government issues relating to the Future of Europe debate is planned for the autumn.

- The Scottish Executive has contributed to the debate in a number of ways, including: a Conference on the Future of Europe organised by the Jean Monet Centre of Excellence in association with the Royal Society of Edinburgh; and a seminar on the Future of Europe in Brussels last October that formed the centrepiece of ten days of activity called “Scotland: our Future in Europe”. The University of Edinburgh is planning a substantial seminar in the early autumn.
- The Northern Ireland Assembly recently held a major debate on the Future of Europe and will hold a Conference involving civil society on 27 June as a first step towards an EU Forum. This would give civil society in Northern Ireland a continuous and regular Forum through which to debate Future of Europe issues.

ACTIVITY IN CIVIL SOCIETY

- Civil society in the UK continues to be active in the Future of Europe debate. NGOs and think tanks regularly hold public events. The Institute for Citizenship’s series of five discussions across Britain, entitled “Europe and its Citizens – the future”, aimed to bring together the views of opinion formers. The Government also encourages business, trade unions and information providers to join the debate.
- Major UK universities – including Birmingham, Sussex, Cambridge and Oxford – have all held seminar series. University College London arranged a major conference in April this year in which students from all over Europe took part.

PARLIAMENTARY ACTIVITY

- The UK’s Parliamentary Convention members have been actively promoting the work of the Convention through public events and meetings throughout the UK.
- In addition they agreed (with the Government representatives) to chose three candidates, from the UK’s allotted six, to represent the UK at the Youth Convention via an open competition run by a national newspaper (the *Independent*). Applicants wrote a short essay setting out their vision for the Future of Europe. More than 80 people aged between 18 and 25 entered.
- The UK’s Parliamentary representatives have kept Parliament (particularly the House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee) informed about the work of the Convention. Along with their Alternates, they also answered questions from the House of Lords EU Select Committee. A Standing Committee at Westminster has been set up in response to parliamentary interest in the Convention’s work.

MAIN ISSUES AND CONCLUSIONS

Some of the UK members of the Convention would question whether there is a “national debate” at all, particularly given that press coverage has so far been limited. Whilst the Convention *per se* has not yet grabbed public attention, British citizens’ interest in European affairs – particularly those aspects that affect their day-to-day lives – remains strong.

Apart from the debate about the euro – a national debate in itself – concerns frequently expressed about Europe include dilution of democracy, the excessive detail of European legislation, and the status of unreformed policies such as the CAP.

Debate in the Devolved Administrations and the regions has focused on opportunities for contributing to European policy, and concerns to preserve local discretion in the way common European values and standards are implemented at the sub-national level.

The Convention has already discussed some of these issues, such as subsidiarity and instruments. But the British public, and the wider European public, will surely judge the Convention on its ability to propose practical solutions to these real problems. We therefore see the national debate launched in the UK – and across Europe – as an on-going process, running parallel to our efforts within the Convention to bring the European Union closer to its citizens.
