

Statement by Tony Blair on the results of the Brussels European Council (London, 21 June 2004)

Caption: On 21 June 2004, Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, outlines to the House of Commons the substance of the draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe adopted at the Brussels European Council held on 17 and 18 June.

Source: PM's statement on the European Council (21 June 2004). [ON-LINE]. [s.l.]: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, [29.04.2005]. Disponible sur <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page5993.asp>.

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/statement_by_tony_blair_on_the_results_of_the_brussels_european_council_london_21_june_2004-en-97272d34-6779-4cad-8eee-2cad876c039.html

Publication date: 23/10/2012

PM's statement on the European Council (21 June 2004)

With permission Mr Speaker I shall make a statement on the European Council which took place in Brussels on 17 and 18 June.

At this Council, the EU now of 25 nations, soon to be 28, agreed a new Treaty for Europe which sets out for the first time, in one single Treaty, the powers, rights and duties of the EU. I have placed a copy of the Presidency Conclusions in the libraries of both Houses. I thank the Irish Presidency, under the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, for their skill in negotiating a successful conclusion. As the Taoiseach said, the Constitutional Treaty makes it clear that Europe is, and I quote, "not a super state; not a federal state but a group of nations". This Treaty makes it plain, again for the first time in a European Treaty, that the EU has only the competences conferred on it by member states; and states expressly, also for the first time, that member states can withdraw from Europe should they want to.

This Treaty makes clear where the EU can and cannot act. It provides for qualified majority voting where we need it: for the single market, for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, for action against international crime and terrorism. It keeps unanimity for the most important decisions and, at our insistence, in particular for tax, social security, for foreign policy, for defence and for decisions on the financing of the Union affecting the British budget contribution. It keeps our ability to opt out of measures affecting our laws on asylum and immigration and extends that so that we cannot be obliged to cooperate on criminal law procedures where we do not want to do so.

For the first time ever, it provides a power for national parliaments to scrutinise proposals from Brussels at the draft stage and to send them back if Parliaments are not satisfied.

It provides, through the route of enhanced cooperation, for a flexible Europe in which groups of countries can take action together within the framework of the European Union provided they do not damage the interests of others. This is a flexibility within the framework of law, not the free for all which some have advocated.

Above all the Treaty provides for the reforms in the working of the EU necessary if it is not to fall into gridlock with 25 members. It reforms the system of the 6-monthly rotating Presidency to provide greater continuity and coherence in a Union of 25; and replaces it with a full time Chairman of the European Council who will serve for up to five years. This is crucial in placing the power to set Europe's agenda in the hands of Europe's intergovernmental body.

The EU Treaty includes, in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the rights of the citizen under EU law. The Charter expressly rules out establishing any new power or task for the European Union or any change in the powers of the European Union. In each area the rights are expressly limited to those available under existing national law and practices and under existing Union law. So, for example, Article 28 of the Charter says that workers and employers have the right to negotiate and conclude collective agreements at the appropriate levels but only "in accordance with Union law and national laws and practices". In addition, the Charter contains explanations for each Article making it clear, for example, that "the ... limits for the exercise of collective action, including strike action, come under national laws and practices, including the question of whether it may be carried out in parallel in several member states". The Treaty requires those explanations to be given due regard by the Courts.

Some have also expressed concern at the references in the Treaty to the primacy of EU law. In fact, primacy of EU law has existed since we joined the European Union and is there in the European Communities Act of 1972. But, of course European law only takes precedence where Member States have agreed Europe should have a competence. The idea this is something new is nonsense.

Mr Speaker, this Treaty also completes and consolidates the existing Treaties of the European Union. Seventy-five percent of it is a repetition of what is in earlier Treaties.

Among the many myths about the constitution that have been published over the last few months have been accusations that we would lose our rebate and our seat on the Security Council; that Brussels would seize control of our oil supplies; that the UK taxpayer would pay for other EU countries' pensions; that we would have to give up control of our army to Brussels, be forced to join the Euro or to raise our taxes, have our foreign policy dictated by Brussels, and lose control of our borders.

Now, the British people have before them the text of the Treaty as agreed. It demolishes those myths.

But the myths, and the propaganda which goes with them, are not really about the Constitutional Treaty. They are about whether Britain should or should not be a leading member of the European Union.

The new Europe of 450 million people is a success for Britain. The new countries of Europe share our view that it should be run by sovereign nation states. They have joined the European Union for the stability, security and prosperity it provides, the same stability, security and prosperity that we have enjoyed as members of the European Union for the past 30 years.

We are in the European Union for the single market and customs union it provides for our goods and services; for the extra 1.8 percent of GDP that membership brings us every year and the 3.5 million jobs which depend on that single market. We are in it for the strength it gives us in trade negotiations with powerful countries like the United States and Japan. We are in it for its network of aid and trade relationships with China, India and the countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia, relationships which make an important contribution to international peace and security and development. Of course there are frustrations and compromises. But the European Union is the most successful way anyone has yet devised of managing the relations between European countries whose national rivalries had, until 60 years ago, only ever been settled in a series of bloody conflicts.

Now, we not only manage those rivalries. We pool our combined strength for our economic advantage; for influence in the world; for peace and security. The power of the European Union has helped eight countries of Eastern Central Europe achieve democratic stability. It is transforming Turkey into a modern democratic state. It is helping achieve peace in the Balkans. Not a single Government of a single nation, either those in Europe now or those waiting to join, opposed this Treaty. All welcomed it. All want it to work. Many share the British view of Europe's future.

All that is what the opponents of this Treaty would put in jeopardy for the sake, not of any real British interest, but of a narrow nationalism which no British government has ever espoused or should ever espouse if it has the true interests of the British people at heart.

In the end, the final say will be with the British people in a referendum. But in that debate, we will argue this Constitutional Treaty represents a success for the new Europe that is taking shape, is a success for Britain and today I commend it to the House.