

## The 2003–2004 Intergovernmental Conference

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**Last updated:** 28/07/2016



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To prevent the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) becoming bogged down in discussions between officials and experts, the European Council decided that the IGC would ‘be conducted by the Heads of State or Government, assisted by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs’, but it did not consider it desirable for the Chairman of the Convention on the Future of Europe to be present. The European Parliament would be involved, but not the national parliaments.

There were differences between the positions of the governments of the founding countries and the United Kingdom, who had been able to make their voices heard in the Convention and who accepted the substance of the draft, and the other countries, who had not been able to assert their points of view and were attempting to take their revenge in the Conference, where unanimity was required. The small states, and the new Member States of the European Union in particular, were all keen to be represented in the Commission and were cautious of majority voting based on population size. Above all, two ‘nearly large’ countries, Spain and Poland, were determined not to lose the advantages that they had secured in Nice under this system. The Italian Presidency tried to find a solution to the problem, but at the Rome European Council (12 and 13 December 2003), Silvio Berlusconi decided not to hold a general debate. This was not a rejection, since the large countries were seeking a successful conclusion, but an adjournment. A solution had to be found before the European elections in June in which the new Member States would be taking part. What is more, the general public was in favour of a European Constitution (77 % of those polled from 14 to 23 January, with 51 % in Britain).

The Irish Presidency worked away quietly in the first half of 2004. The landscape then changed with the departure of José María Aznar, who would not move on Spain’s position, and his replacement, following the Madrid attacks and the general elections, by the Socialist José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who was more pro-European and more conciliatory. As a result, Poland found itself isolated and had to compromise. The Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, was able to envisage an agreement before the end of the Irish Presidency. However, discussions on the arrangements for majority voting and on the extension of the areas covered were difficult. A new offensive was waged, in vain, against the lack of a reference to Christianity in the preamble to the treaty, which simply referred to the Union’s ‘religious heritage’ in the name of secularism.

Eventually, after the European elections (during which it was barely mentioned), the European Constitution was adopted by the Brussels European Council (17 and 18 June 2004), despite the tense atmosphere among its members. The designation of Romano Prodi’s successor as President of the Commission saw the United Kingdom oppose the appointment of Guy Verhofstadt, who was sponsored by France and Germany. Relations were very strained between Tony Blair on the one hand and Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder on the other. But a result had to be achieved. Following a record low turnout in the European elections, failure would be disastrous.

The ‘Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe’ was formally signed in Rome on 29 October 2004 by the representatives of the Twenty-Five, in the same room in the Capitol where the Rome Treaties had been signed by the six founding Member States of the European Communities.