

Fifteen Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong

Or How in 2005 the French Saved Europe for Civilization

Eric Britton, EcoPlan International, Paris, 30 May 2005.

6:30 a.m. The morning after. It's France. Pow!

The radio alarm explodes and I am dragged into the new day by the self-pitying howls and doomsday messages coming from Right and Left alike in the wake of yesterday's Referendum in which a clear majority of the voters gave a resounding "No" to the proposed new constitution for Europe. As the news streamed in I was suddenly reminded of a phrase we used back in the late fifties when I was a buck private in the (US) army making the world safe for democracy. (You noticed I hope!).

We said back then, with only half a smile, that ours was a classic situation of: "The incompetent leading the unwilling to do the unnecessary". And if ever there were a single phrase that captured the mood here today, that has to be as good as any.

The key to today's apparent conundrum here lies in the first third of that noble phrase -- leadership failure. Not the second. Nor the third. Let's have a look.

Neither the government nor the parties of the Right (same thing these days) were able to make a convincing case for what should have been a simple win. To the contrary they made such a great hash out of their explanations that a substantial portion of the electorate voted against the treaty simply because their supposed leaders and mentors were grossly incompetent of making their case. Air ball.

And as often happens here the apparatchiks of the Left, our dear Socialists, were unable to do any better. They shot themselves in the foot in the last presidential election three years ago when it should have been a shoo-in. And this time they did it again. It seems to be an art form over here.

The least of their problem was that they couldn't stop bickering among themselves and hence were unable to present a united face.

But here's the real joke: Even if they had managed to present a united front, they still would not have been able to make their point. You see, they simply can't figure out who they are and what it is they want for their country. Right and Left in France are terminally confused. Sound familiar America?

The simple truth is that the making of "Europe" is serious and important business that commits the people of France to a future. Look, if you don't know what is going on, you would have to be a fool to plunge into that dark space. Dark space? Well 500 pages, 448 articles and 36 supplementary protocols is hardly what you would call light on the subject. And yesterday there were some fifteen million Frenchmen who came to the polls and said: Whoa, we better have a look before we jump.

But not all the problems were with the leadership vacuum here in our obdurate impenetrable Hexagon.

The second gross agent of self-destruction was the all but comical performance and pandering incompetence of the European institutions: the European Commission, the Parliament, the European Bank and the rest. The Great White Hope of Europe? Hardly. Their representatives wandered in from time to time with weak smiles, tepid words, and a bit of finger pointing here and there; but they too had nothing commanding to offer. And if the European project cannot be made clear by its own leaders, well we can't be all that harsh on our national politicians here in France.

The outstanding lesson was that no one trusts the politicians. And not only here.

And, or so it often goes, that nobody trusts what many see as over-paid blinkered neo-Soviet decisioncrats in Brussels whose concern for their own cushioned jobs and prerogatives far outstrips not only their commitment to but also their understanding of what "Europe" is supposed to be all about.

Hmm. Okay, it's always great fun to whine, but is there any good news? Well happily there is plenty of it. And if we can get a good grasp of this then we are well positioned to decide as to what to do next.

For starters, the last two months of the information program and public debate has been a significant first for this Republic. There has been nothing like a true citizen consultation of what Europe is supposed to be all about here over these last decades, and this too was a critical lynchpin of the leadership failure.

But this time the debate took place and the level of citizen involvement and interest was very high indeed. Everybody – quite literally – talked about it, argued, polemicized and occasionally even listened over these last heady weeks. And if you take into account the appalling performance of their leaders in explicating the issues, the fact that some seventy percent of the electorate actually went to the polls to place their votes on a sunny day in May is an enormous vindication for the entire process. Bingo! Democracy is alive and well in France.

Second: the polls made a clear statement to Paris and Brussels alike. Stop! Think! Confer! Clarify! Convince! And the message has been sent that the citizens of France expect to be directly involved in this process. I think we should be able to work with that, though some new habits are going to have to be acquired on all sides to make this work.

And finally, there is another phenomenon at work here about which we are not hearing much in the press, and that is the somewhat arcane concept of "swarm intelligence". Defined typically as the results of collective behaviour in decentralized, self-organized systems within which there are very large numbers of individual units – which sounds like a good working definition of 21st century democracy to me.

The interesting thing about swarm intelligence is its suggestion that large groups can develop a degree of cognition and even understanding of which the individual parts are not necessarily capable. Think about it. Fifteen million Frenchmen put their heads together sent a message that is more than the sum of its individual parts.

Alexis de Tocqueville put it this way when he contemplated the lessons, if any, that America might offer for Old World. In Democracy in America, he wrote: "In democratic countries knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others."

"Knowledge of how to combine ". Precisely the process that must now be engaged in France. All but the most spaced out souls here know fully well that Europe is a great idea and great ideal. But someone needs to explain to us precisely what it means. Clarity of thought , followed by engagement of intelligence and informed decisions. Which is what those fifteen million Frenchmen are asking for.

Stay tuned. This is far from over. And one day you may find yourself explaining to your grandchildren, how in 2005 the French saved Europe for civilization.

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Eric Britton is an international consultant to government and industry who has lived and worked in Paris since 1969. He can be reached at mail@ericbritton.org.

This is not part of the article and not at all relevant. But it's the wink behind my title - so just in case you didn't have it at hand. [And it is of course quite awful, tin ear and all. A reminder in its way of how ignorant we can be of places and cultures we hardly know. But it rarely keeps us from shooting off our big mouths]

Fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong

by Rose, Raskin, & Fisher, 4-27-1927 New York

They say the French are naughty
They say the French are bad
They all declare that over there, the French are going mad.
They have a reputation of being very gay

I just got back from Paris, and I just want to say:
When they go parley-vee and parley-vou,
This for me, zat for you,
Fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong.

When they go Ohh la la la la la la
On the bully boulevard
Fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong.

They shake-a the hand
They shake-a the feet
They roll ze eyes and kiss cafe right on the street

Even though the Irish and the Dutch
Say it don't amount to much
Fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong.