

WALLSTROM LETTER

Full text of the letter from Margot Wallstrom, Vice President of the European Commission on the lessons to be drawn from the result of the Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty

To the President and Members of the Commission

In the wake of the Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, much has been said about how best to inform the public and gain their confidence and support. Some of these issues emerged in the sharp relief in the post-referendum poll we carried out in Ireland. But we cannot treat the Irish ðnoö as merely a national issue or only a Treaty ratification problem. The difficulties encountered in explaining to citizens the rationale of the Lisbon Treaty and in clarifying that the European Union needs to be equipped for today's and tomorrow's challenges are difficulties which we encounter across the Union.

In October last year, we presented a communication on ðCommunicating Europe in Partnershipö which outlined a number of ways in which the EU, through the institutions and the Member States, could address these challenges. I want to share with you now some thoughts on the lessons learnt on how to work together on communicating Europe, and some idea on the way ahead and on where greater efforts are needed, particularly in the run-up to the European Parliament elections in June 2009.

Lessons from the Referendum

Even though ratification of the Treaty is a national affair, there are some general lessons that can be drawn from the results of the referendum on how to communicate, both on the Treaty and on the EU more generally.

- The more emotive no campaign worked better than the more factual yes.
- Not enough was done by the yes campaign to reach out to young people and women.
- The internet was almost exclusively used by no campaigners.
- There was no effective rebuttal of misinformation about the Treaty.

The context of the vote in Ireland is also important. There has been a general deterioration of confidence among citizens in almost all Member States, similar in scale to the one that followed the events of September 11th, 2001. This appears to be mainly due to the difficult situation of the economy and of employment. It is certainly not related to the Irish referendum.

Consequences for Communication Policy

Overcoming the distance of the EU from its citizens is a long-term project, involving delivery of good policies as well as communicating them well. This Commission has taken the decisions to modernise and change the Commission's approach to communication that can be summed up by:

- ó Two-way communications (listening as much as talking; responding to citizens' interests and concerns);
- Going local (investing more of our communications resources in the Representations and redesigning their approach through Europe Houses and European Public Spaces);
- Strengthening and modernising our communication tools (through the adoption of new internet and audiovisual strategies);
- Stimulating political debates across Europe on the EU (Plan D/European Political Foundations regulation/Debate Europe/MyParl.);
- Strengthening our partnership in communication with the European Parliament, Council and Member States at national and regional level.

Some of these improvements will need some time before they have a real impact. Yet the political calendar requires faster delivery. As agreed by the June European Council, the ratification process will continue. With four more parliaments voting since the summit, 23 Member States have now approved the Treaty. The way forward will be explored at the October European Council. The Commission will continue to support those Member States that still have to ratify the Lisbon Treaty in order to ensure that the fullest possible information is available to the public. Voices have been raised calling for a 'citizens' summary' of the Treaty and the Commission could assist in its preparation.

Beyond the ratification process, the European elections will be the next important test case on which judgements will be made on the level of engagement of our citizens with the EU.

In this context, what can we already do now?

A. Agree a Partnership on Communication with the Institutions and Member States.

One aspect of EU communication which hasn't changed is the blame game. We have a common interest to put an end to this, and it can only change if we are prepared to work together in Partnership, agreeing Priorities and Planning together (three Ps). It was to overcome past difficulties that the Commission proposed, in its communication last October, the creation of a framework to provide for better co-operation between the EU institutions and Member States while respecting the autonomy of all actors. This was well received in the European Parliament but got a more mitigated response in the Council.

Following the Irish referendum, the implications for communication were discussed in an informal meeting of the Presidency, Parliament and Commission in Strasbourg on July 9th and again at the informal meeting of Europe Ministers in Brest on July 12th. As a result, the Presidency is now willing to work towards achieving agreement on a partnership at the European Council in October, and will make an initial report to the General Affairs Council in September. Parliament maintains its strong support for such an agreement.

In addition, the Commission can continue to develop its individually tailored management partnerships with Member States to communicate on European issues together. After three were launched last year, a further six are being negotiated this year, and resources are available in the draft budget for further expansion next year.

B. Consolidate a new communications culture inside the Commission.

We need to accelerate implementation of our communication policies, putting into place quickly the new governance structure for communication inside the Commission we agreed in the screening. In particular:

- The Commission needs to address wider audiences, and specifically target women and young people through the media they use most: TV, radio, Internet. This implies accelerating the implementation of the Internet and audiovisual strategies to enable development of a new TV network, the overhaul of the Europa website, development of EU Tube and other internet portals, and greater use of blogs.
- Citizensø summaries are proving a good initiative to explain Commission proposals in clear and simple language. They need to become a standard practice.
- Misinformation should be targeted, by activating a rebuttal function in the Member States and/or directly from Brussels.
- The Commissionø civil society contact points have to be developed further (including a specific web portal to allow easier access) and we need to invest more in civil society opinion-leaders in Member States.
- Greater efforts are needed to promote the use of Commission Staff as Ambassadors, and to provide the necessary training and preparation. Face-to-face communication should be further developed through the back to school, spring days and May 9th projects.
- Communication priorities should not only reflect the political agenda, but be decided on the basis of the daily concerns of citizens. This should be a part of the planning of the Annual policy Strategy and the Commission Legislative and Work Programme from the earliest stages.

C. Working to promote Participation in the EP Elections

Many preparations are already underway, and DG COMM is working in a task-force with the Parliament to develop plans, but in order to underline the importance of these elections in communication terms, a detailed proposal will be circulated to colleagues in September.

This will involve mainstreaming the elections into all of the work plans of both the Representations and in headquarters. It is likely that the elections will become one, if not the communication priority agreed between the institutions this year, and the Commission should put every effort into this work.

Improving communications and strengthening the trust and support of citizens for the European construction is a long-term project. There are no quick fixes. Nor can we opt out of the debate. It is not enough to do the right things - we must do them right too, and be seen to do so. If we do not engage the citizens others will, and often with less regard to the actual situation and the real complexities of the challenges we face. This is a permanent challenge for all of us and I look forward to discussing it with you in the autumn.

- Margot Wallstrom