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Denmark may cause a surprise...

Having held six referenda on EU-issues since 1972, Denmark has the utmost experience in this perilous democratic exercise.

There never was any doubt that a Danish ratification of the constitutional treaty would require a binding referendum. In the case of transfer of sovereignty to the EU, the Danish Constitution requires a five-sixths majority in Parliament or a referendum. Laws notwithstanding, it has become customary to hold a referendum in Denmark on all major treaty changes in the EU, the Nice Treaty being an exception. At least one separate referendum also needs to be held before letting go of one or more of the Danish opt-outs.

A schedule for the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty will only be set up after the parliamentary elections on February 8. With local elections in November 2005, there seems to be two options for the date of the referendum: summer 2005 or spring 2006. No decision has yet been taken. Leading Danish MEPs have recently argued for an early vote because momentum is positive at present and could be lost if the takes place after the one in the UK. Former Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, a Social Democrat, has pleaded thus: "Denmark should not remain in the slipstream of others but make its own decisions. In my opinion this draws greater respect from voters."

In November 2004 the Conservative-Liberal coalition government secured an agreement with the main opposition parties (Social Democrats, Social Liberals and Socialist People's Party) that they will support the Constitutional Treaty. In light of previous referenda in Denmark, this is seen as crucial to ratification.

This agreement, called "Denmark in the enlarged European Union", outlines "a new, proactive Danish European Policy" and defines Danish priorities for the EU agenda in the years to come. Each of the contracting parties is allowed to oppose any future extension of qualified majority voting in the Council on specific issues, e.g. social and labour market policies as well as certain aspects of taxation.

The Socialist People's Party, which has tipped the balance in previous referenda, was usually split on the EU issues, but in December 2004 a party referendum gave clear support for the treaty and the national agreement, thus raising considerably chances of a Danish ratification. With this historical shift in attitude of the Socialist People's Party, the parliamentary opposition to the Constitutional Treaty is left in the hands of the Unity List, a small far-left wing party, the Danish People's Party on the far right and the Christian Democrats, a small centre party. The latter is far from certain to be represented in Parliament after the February 8 elections.

As before, the euro sceptic movements are expected to play a major role in the campaign, although the June Movement went down to one seat in the latest elections for the European Parliament, while The People's Movement against the EU retains its single seat.

Opinion polls are currently favourable. According to the most recent Eurobarometer survey (carried out in November 2004), 44 per cent are in favour of the draft European Constitution, 30 per cent against and 26 per cent undecided). Traditionally euro sceptic Denmark now is close to EU average. Several national polls reveal an even stauncher support suggesting that a majority would support the Constitution, while the opposition varies from 18 to 30 per cent and 15 to 30 per cent remain undecided.

There is no single explanation for these figures. The enlargement has certainly helped considerably, as Danes all along have supported the admission of the former Soviet block countries. Equally, there is a growing understanding of the fact that membership of the EU is advantageous to face common challenges in a globalised world.

These positive opinion polls may also be a first sign of a more fundamental change of attitude towards the EU in Denmark in recent years. Today few Danes would prefer to quit the EU, although many still find the EU not democratic enough and distant from everyday life.

Overall, the pro-EU side will start out from a good position when the campaign gains momentum. However, experience tells us that this advance can easily be lost, particularly if the campaign is rather long and takes place during a summer. A Danish “yes” can therefore not be taken for granted. One of the main problems is that voters do not necessarily limit their answer to the question on the ballot and that the outcome can be influenced by any kind of more or less relevant concerns. Bearing in mind the outcome of the Maastricht referendum, part of the electorate will be confident that a “no” vote will not have negative consequences. These voters remain convinced that by the end of the day the “political establishment” will change a “no” vote into a “yes”.

No certainty is possible before the last vote has been cast, but this time the Danes could well take Europe by surprise, as it currently seems far easier to obtain a “yes” in Denmark than in a number of other EU member states.

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