

European progress often calls for flexibility

by Julian Micallef

The European Council's heavy agenda for its last meeting between the 11th and 12th December continued to show that where there is a will there is a way.

The chances of having the Lisbon Treaty in place, still going through the arduous process of ratification by Member States, received a huge boost when the Heads of State underlined that the necessary legal guarantees may be given in order to allay the fears of the Irish population. According to a post-referendum analysis conducted in Ireland, the concerns mainly revolved on perceived loss of neutrality, loss of control over taxation matters as well as in the whittling down of national safeguards over ethical issues such as abortion.

Critics had argued that pushing for another referendum in Ireland would make a mockery out of democracy and the country's Constitution. In this case though, we have seen a palpable engagement in dialogue between the people's wishes and the vision set out by the EU leaders and lawmakers. If the difficulties have really been addressed, a second referendum should consist of an approval that Europe did listen, even though it had not implied those threats.

The issue of continuing the current practice of having Commissioners hailing from each Member State can be regarded as a more significant move. The present Treaty, mindful of the quick-paced and substantial enlargements taking place, indicates that the number of Commissioners must be reduced in 2009. On this matter, while also keeping in mind another difficulty that was raised by the referendum result, the European Council's conclusions state that if the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty continues and is effectively enacted, then each Member State could continue nominating one of its citizens for the College of Commissioners. The numbers (27 Commissioners and possibly more to follow) involved may not lend themselves to being easily workable, yet such a decision shall to a certain extent ensure that no country's specific situation will be completely left out when legislative proposals are being adopted.

The need for flexibility is also being put to the test by the financial crisis. The EU's strict regulations on state aid and budgetary indicators are being stretched with a reason – to provide leeway for some Member States which may be experiencing economic difficulties in the current context. The emphasis here is being placed on 'temporary' and 'targeted' – tough times call for tough decisions, yet they must not be prolonged unnecessarily.

Perhaps the image of an "iron fist" springs to mind when you hear about the European Union. Adding compromise and flexibility could form a better picture. Having 27+ Member States and a stronger European Parliament should continue seeing to that.

Mr Micallef is Acting Head – Consultation, at the Malta-EU Steering and Action Committee (MEUSAC)