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Understanding public opinion

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Opening speech at the stakeholders conference on
"Understanding public opinion"

Madrid, 27 October 2006

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to Madrid and to this conference on "**Understanding European Public opinion**".

Many of you have travelled a long way to be here: thank you for making the effort.

We are here to discuss a very important question – **the role of opinion polling in the making of European democracy**.

The relation between public opinion polls and democracy is a classic subject, although not an easy one.

George Gallup junior reports: *"My dad thought that polls were absolutely vital to a democracy. He felt that polls were extremely important because it removed the power from lobbying groups and from smoke-filled rooms and let the public into the act. **It was a way to let the public speak**".*

I would add that **this is especially true in the case of the European construction**, where public involvement through the mechanisms of representative democracy has only been a late achievement.

The Commission started to sponsor surveys of public opinion in the countries of the European Community already in 1970, thanks to the pioneering work of Jacques-René Rabier and Ronald Inglehart.

These surveys were mainly designed to measure public awareness and attitudes toward the Common Market and other European Community institutions. They also enquired into the objectives that were given top priority for one's own nation. It was a first move to relate to citizens, well before the first elections of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage.

At that time, **the idea that citizens should or could have a say in the European integration project was hardly an issue**.

And the very concept of a "European public opinion" appeared vague and highly questionable. Actually, the first Eurobarometer series, launched in 1973 referred to the "opinion of the publics – rigorously plural - of the members of the European Community".

Since then, **many things have changed**.

We currently talk of **European citizens' attitudes and concerns**, and we no longer hesitate to talk about European public opinion.

Today, we take for granted that **most Europeans share a common or core political culture**, which is set of values, principles and beliefs. They are enshrined in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights that all Member States have underwritten and that is part of the Constitutional Treaty.

For more than thirty years, Eurobarometer has accompanied and underpinned the fundamental changes that the European project has undergone. To some extent, it has been itself an agent of these changes.

It has informed policy makers, academics and media about people's expectations and concerns as regards Europe. It has warned about people's disenchantment and lack of ownership. **It has helped Europe to become "aware of itself"**.

I would like to make three points which, I hope, can help steering our discussions at this conference.

Three points that we highlight in our White Paper on a European Communication Policy.

- First, the importance of **polling as a tool for democracy**.

Polls and surveys give a voice to the ‘**silent citizens**’ – the people who do not vote, do not take active part in political life, do not channel their opinions through groups of interests or citizens organisations.

Polls can also focus on **specific sections of the population** – local communities, immigrants, urban teenagers or rural housewives, for example – and find out their particular views, needs and concerns.

What makes polls unique and irreplaceable is their random sampling technique and their potential for comprehensive and balanced results. They can track social changes and emerging phenomena which otherwise escape the attention of politicians.

This is especially important in today's Europe where globalisation is rapidly transforming our societies, the way we live and do business.

To keep track of these developments we need really good **pan-European polling and analysis**.

I already talked about Eurobarometer surveys, which interview thousands of people right across the EU. They are subject to independent scrutiny and the results are published regularly.

But we feel that these instruments could be used more and better.

How, exactly?

- This is the second issue I want to address today.

What **technical innovations** would enable us to carry out polls and surveys faster and more easily?

How could we **refine** the methods we are currently using?

How could we best combine opinion polls with **other instruments** such as media monitoring, focus groups and citizens' panels?

Many of you are real experts in this field and **the Commission wants to hear your views and your ideas**.

The EU institutions need outside experts such as yourselves to propose new technologies, better methods for survey and analysis, and to help us better exploit the results.

- That brings me to the third issue we need to discuss: how better to use and disseminate polling results?

One suggestion we make in our White Paper is to set up an **independent Observatory of European public opinion**.

The Observatory could be a physical agency with a permanent staff of specialists working full time. Or it could be a network of national experts, such as yourselves, meeting at regular intervals.

Whichever option we choose, experts and specialists are needed:

- to improve the design of our polls;
- to frame the questions better;
- to provide a fast and comprehensive analysis of the results;
- and to ensure maximum media coverage and publicity for the results, raising public awareness and fuelling public discussion.

Collaboration between national experts would also **develop new and valuable synergies between the EU, national and local levels.**

To sum up: polls can be an **important tool for democracy** – a major "hearing aid" for policymakers. But they need to use **excellent modern methods** and their results need to be **disseminated and publicized very widely** – with the help of national experts.

These are the main points we make in our **White Paper**.

People have commented on them during the past seven months of **online consultation**. Some of the comments have been negative and critical, others positive and constructive.

Some people would like to see **country-specific and regional or local surveys** complementing the standard pan-European polls.

Others have suggested using polls to measure how satisfied citizens are with **specific EU policies**.

Some have welcomed the **idea of a network of national experts** while questioning the need for a physical Observatory.

Others see **the internet** as a good tool for surveying public opinion – provided care is taken to include all social groups, including those who are less "computer-literate".

Ladies and gentlemen,

You have read our ideas and heard some of the online comments we have received. Now **the Commission wants to hear your comments and your ideas**. I'm looking forward to a very stimulating and constructive conference.

A final remark. I have said many times that communication is **a two-way street and that we must "put ears" to the European Union**.

Opinion polls and surveys **certainly give the EU ears**, but we need to use them to **listen more carefully**. With your help, using the input from this conference, the EU institutions aim to **really hear** what the citizens of Europe are saying to us.

Thank you!