

## Brown must set out his vision for Europe

As prime minister, Gordon Brown needs to develop a coherent policy towards Europe. One of the problems for the Blair government has been that in opposition Labour never worked out what being pro-European meant; it was simply part of rebranding and repositioning the party. This was made relatively easy by the chaos over Europe within the Tory party, which remains so scarred that it is still unable to speak with confidence on an issue of major national interest.

In government the focus on positioning has continued. Tony Blair's tactics have been to caricature opponents into positions they do not hold: anyone who goes further than he does in criticising the European Union is accused not only of being eurosceptic, but of being anti-European or wanting to disengage from Europe - an isolationist! No one in their right mind is against co-operation within the EU, but that is very different from supporting ever deeper integration and the transfer of more power to European institutions. Given our history and geographical position, Britain can never be anything but engaged in Europe. The question, as ever, is how?

Huge opportunities have been lost to set out clearly the type of political and economic framework Britain wants for the EU. It could have been done before the EU constitution was drawn up and it could have been done during the period of reflection after the "No" votes in France and Holland. Sadly Mr Blair's only strategy (along with other EU leaders) has been to do all he can to avoid a referendum on the forthcoming mini-constitution.

Will Mr Brown continue with the same policy? His attitude to Europe is opaque. In opposition he was an important figure in committing Labour to entry of the exchange rate mechanism, but there was no serious examination of the lessons of membership and expulsion from the exchange rate mechanism for entering economic and monetary union. Mr Brown certainly played his role in keeping Britain out of Emu, but has so far not dropped the notion that it might be a good idea in principle. In the face of all the contrary evidence, does he still think that?

Blair-like rhetoric from Ed Balls, one of Brown's closest economic aides, about how "defending our national interest means being at the table and winning the arguments" might suggest that Mr Brown's policy will simply be more of the same. But a crunch test for Mr Brown will come within days of taking office. Will he stick with Mr Blair's plan to agree a new treaty before the end of the year and drop the previous promise of a referendum?

Mr Brown needs to spend his first days in office defining himself and he is clearly conscious of the need to signal a "clean break" from the Blair era. But instead he will find himself fending off calls for a referendum. Mr Brown has said he wants to "listen and learn" and promised a new "humility" in politics. But instead he and his new ministers will be touring the studios explaining why the government has gone back on its referendum promise, and why the public cannot be trusted with a vote. So much for the new politics.

The whole process of re-introducing the proposals from the rejected constitution, while making a few "presentational changes" - as Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, put it in a recent letter - is exactly the sort of manoeuvre that has made people cynical about politics and critical of the EU. If Mr Brown goes along with this it will give voters a pretty poor first impression.

Attempting to argue that the new treaty is not significant is unlikely to work. At the very least it is likely to propose an EU president, an EU foreign minister and changes to the voting system that would make it much harder for member states to block legislation.

Instead of just going with the flow, the Brown administration needs to come up with a strategic vision of what kind of EU it wants. The allocation of power between the EU and its member states is the central issue. In recent comments in the Financial Times, Mr Balls talked about being "hard-headed" on Europe and having the self-confidence to say "No". This will be an early test for prime minister Brown. He should have the confidence to say "No" to any new treaty that transfers further powers and authority from Britain to the EU and put any new treaty he does agree to a vote in the referendum. Mr Brown said this week he wants to involve the public in decisions. The EU treaty will test whether this is anything other than hot air.

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