It's democracy, stupid!
Stefan Collignon[1] and Christan Paul[2]

The European Union is facing a structural crisis of legitimacy. Over the last 16 years, seven European referenda have been lost. Even profoundly pro-European citizens have voted against Europe, because they fear that the EU is heading in a direction they do not understand, approve, or control. The message behind all negative referenda is simple: Europeans want a different Europe.

After each crisis, policy makers have avoided addressing the issue of legitimacy. They argued that by implementing the "right" polices, producing "deliveries" of peace and prosperity, citizens will approve the project of European integration. Yet, Ireland proves the delusion of this strategy: Europe has contributed to peace in Northern Ireland, and the Irish Republic has rapidly grown from poor house to one of the most prosperous countries in the Union. But results are no longer enough. Citizens expect more from Europe than arcane compromises based on broad all-countries, all-parties embracing policy consensus.

The disrespect for democracy re-enforces citizens' frustration. They feel excluded from making choices. Remote elites tell them that there are no alternatives to the course of action pursued. Governments negotiate, Parliaments have to ratify - at the risk of otherwise bringing down the whole European edifice. This way of decision-making may have been appropriate in the early years of constructing the European Community, when consensual decisions by national governments *created* European public goods in the interest of all citizens. But today these public goods are a reality. They need to be managed now. This raises new issues that cannot be dealt with by the old methods. Inter-governmental cooperation can no longer govern the European Union of 27 member states efficiently. When the part dominates the whole, efficiency suffers and legitimacy vanishes. National interests take the common good for hostage.

After half a century of integration, all Europeans share certain common public goods. They derive from the existence of the single market, which needs an efficient and equitable regulatory framework. But it also requires new instruments for fighting transnational crime, controlling external boarders or engaging in international diplomacy. Many Europeans also share the euro, which transforms economic variables like inflation, interest rates, exchanges rates and macroeconomic stability into common goods and interests that affect each and every citizen.

Citizens wish to decide the political orientation of decisions that affect them all. Naturally, they have different views on this. In a normal democracy, political parties make competing policy proposals. By seeking to persuade voters, they create the public sphere of policy debates, which allows citizens to make deliberated choices. Not so in the European Union. Here, political orientations are chosen by the European Council, who charges the European Commission and national administrations with their

---

implementation. In this Europe, citizens are powerless and frustrated. Conforming to the democratic norms of a modern society requires putting citizens first, not member states; letting Europeans choose the direction of policies, not governments; separating the election of national governments from the administration of European common goods. What we need now is the politisation of European politics and the election of a European government.

National governments are not the democratic representation of European citizens. They are elected to administer national public goods; by definition they cannot have a mandate for policies that concern all European citizens. Who would call a government democratic that obtains legitimacy only from by-elections without ever having to face a general election?

After the Irish referendum four options remain:
1. Abandon institutional reforms. In this case the European Union will die a slow and gradual death caused by gridlock and nationalistic blackmail.
2. Enhanced cooperation between member states. Varying coalitions of willing governments may deepen integration, where others do not want to follow. This option may appeal to bureaucrats in European and national administrations, but it would further deepen the gap between pro-European élites and disenfranchised citizens. For intergovernmental cooperation excludes democratic participation in decision making.
3. Ask Ireland to reconsider. It worked in 2001, why not this time? In the short run, this may preserve the basic achievements of European integration, but it does not address the problem of democratic legitimacy. If governments return after the crisis to business as usual, nothing is gained.
4. Address the core problem of democracy and create a European Political Union. At the request by the European Council, the next European Parliament, elected in 2009, should elaborate a Constitution for the European Political Union and set up a government for the administration of European common goods. This would be a limited government, in charge of only those public goods that affect all European citizens together; it will be democratically elected by and accountable to the European Parliament. Citizens thereby obtain the right to choose policy directions when they elect their representatives.

Given that not all member states may wish to participate in such political deepening, the existing economic Union must be maintained as it is. But the new Political Union, adopted by a coalition of the willing, will allow the re-foundation of a politically united Europe and cooperate with the other member states in the single market. Within the garden of the single market, we would construct the house of European democracy that could help us to overcome the present crisis.