

EU's propaganda failures

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There are a few problems inherent in the EU's assumption that if only it could get its message across, voters would support it.

Ahead of this week's elections, the UK office of the European parliament has been taking a roadshow around various cities – the aim being to connect directly with citizens by emphasising how the parliament is relevant to their lives.

For rather longer, the European commission – which, unlike the parliament, lacks any formal connections with citizens in member states – has been concerned with "bringing the EU and citizens closer together". Recognising that the supranational perspective – which has always been its *raison d'être* – may no longer hold the benefits it once did, the commission has been co-funding communication events aimed at "getting the message across".

The driving force behind this has been Margot Wallström, vice-president of the commission with responsibility for its communication strategy. In 2004 Wallström published a book with the subtitle "Why is it so hard to love the EU?". The British public's answer may well be: "Because it's fat (takes on too many things it shouldn't), ugly (doesn't look like an international organisation should), and boring." While I doubt Wallström would go so far as to claim people should actually love the EU, the commission's entire communication strategy does pose questions about what bringing the EU and citizens closer together really means.

For a start, the idea implies that they're currently too far apart. Certainly there appears to be a distance between what many people think the EU should look like and how it actually looks. But if a convergence of values is required, I get the feeling it will involve more movement on the part of the citizens than the institutions. Implicit in the logic of the communication strategy on "getting the message across" is the suggestion that if citizens knew and understood the benefits of the European Union, they'd be more likely to share the institutions' vision. It's not so much a matter of EU institutions trying to get closer to citizens, as asking citizens to do the legwork themselves.

Perhaps the European parliament and commission should avoid activities designed to get people interested in Europe, or sell its benefits in the hope that they'll increase people's understanding of, and their support for, the whole EU project. Quite apart from the problems inherent in assuming that if only people understood the EU they'd support it, these exercises tend to generate more hostility than support because they're widely viewed as wasting taxpayers' money on EU propaganda. Some argue that in order to enhance the EU's legitimacy,

the focus should be on doing what individual countries acting alone cannot – tackling the challenges of climate change and global recession for example.

The problem is that the EU's capacity to act effectively cannot be separated from people's views about it. Clearly, the EU needs to reform its institutions in order to function effectively. However, the last few attempts to do so have been unsuccessful because when people have had the opportunity to confirm whether or not they like the EU's new direction they've said "no". The results of the referendums in France, the Netherlands and Ireland didn't simply reflect a judgment on the treaties they were ostensibly about – just as this week's elections won't be solely about who people want to represent them in Europe's parliament.

And this in turn constitutes another gap: between the questions the public are asked, and the ones they really want to answer. Recognising the full extent of what people are trying to say in the elections might allow EU institutions to get closer to the citizens, but they may also realise they'd prefer to stay further away.