

## **FINLAND BECOMES THE SIXTEENTH MEMBER STATE TO RATIFY THE EUROPEAN CONSTITUTION**

On 5<sup>th</sup> December 2006 Finland became the 16<sup>th</sup> Member State of the European Union to ratify the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. The European Commission welcomed this vote that illustrated "*the Finnish support of a more democratic, more transparent and more efficient European Union.*" This event which comes just as the country is chairing the Union and on the eve of the country's national day (former Grand Duchy of Russia, Finland gained its independence on 6th December 1917), the Finnish ratification is of great significance.

The choice of ratification by Parliament was approved after MP's voted on 12th May last; 104 in favour, 24 against and 11 abstentions (61 MP's were absent when the votes were cast). The Social Democrat Party (SDP), the Centre Party (KESK), the National Coalition Party (KOK) and the Swedish People's Party (SKP) were in favour. These four parties have 156 seats in Parliament in all. The Greens (VIHR), the Left Alliance (VAS), the True Finnish (PS) and several members of the Centre for Christian Democrats (SKL) wanted the European Constitution to be subject to a popular consultation.

On 9th May a petition demanding that a referendum be held, signed by 50,000 people over two years which originated from some left and extreme leftwing parties as well as Attac Finland, was delivered to MP's. Opinion polls revealed at the time that most Finnish wanted to be consulted on the European Constitution. According to a poll undertaken by TNS Gallup in April 57% of those interviewed and notably the young said they were in favour of the organisation of a referendum, 23% said they were in favour of ratification of the European treaty by Parliament and 15% said they wanted MP's to reject the text.

According to articles 93, 94 and 95 of the Finnish Constitution international treaties have to be ratified by Parliament by the simple majority of MP's present if the text does not lead to any constitutional modification and by simple majority of two thirds in the opposite case.

On 5th December it was the great majority (125 votes in favour 39 against) of MP's who approved the ratification of the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. 36 MPs were absent for the vote. Seven members of the Social Democrat Party or the Centre Party did not follow voting instructions on the part of their movements and voted against.

*"We expected this result but I am extremely pleased. The Constitutional Treaty is a balanced whole, a reform which Europe needs,"* declared Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen (KESK) who could not take part in the vote since he was in Brussels at the time. *"This does not mean that the Constitution will be applied but it is important to move forwards on all central issues,"* he added. Last May Matti Vanhanen said that he was confident of the future of the European Constitution after the Dutch general elections (planned for spring 2007 but which finally took place on 22<sup>nd</sup> November last) and the French Presidential and General Elections in 2007.

*"The Finnish people will send a signal to say that we need the Constitution, that this text is the best compromise possible and that it makes the European Union more efficient and more democratic. We are not simply saying "Yes" for Finland but also to encourage the other Member States,"* declared Jan Vilen, president of the Committee for European Affairs in Parliament.

To date 16 State have ratified the European Constitution : Lithuania (11th November 2004), Hungary (20th December 2004), Slovenia (1st February 2005), Spain (20th February 2005, by

referendum), Italy (6th April 2005), Greece (19th April 2005), Slovakia (11<sup>th</sup> May 2005), Austria (25<sup>th</sup> May 2005), Germany (27<sup>th</sup> May 2005), Latvia (2<sup>nd</sup> June 2005), Cyprus (30<sup>th</sup> June 2005), Malta (6<sup>th</sup> July 2005), Luxembourg (10th July 2005, by referendum), Belgium (8<sup>th</sup> February 2006), Estonia (9<sup>th</sup> May 2006) and Finland (5<sup>th</sup> December 2006). Two countries have rejected it: France (29th May 2005) and the Netherlands (1st June 2005).

Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen, is due to publish the conclusions of his discussions with his European partners about the future of the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe during the European Council that will take place on 14th and 15th December. In addition to this German Chancellor Angela Merkel whose country will succeed Finland as Chair of the European Union on 1<sup>st</sup> January said that she wanted to start talks about the European treaty again very quickly.

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