

Prodi calls on "big three" to back European constitution

22 February 2004

EU Business

<http://www.eubusiness.com/afp/040222113948.trgmzdho>

The president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, on Sunday urged the European Union's "big three" -- Britain, France and Germany -- to put their weight behind reviving efforts to adopt a European constitution.

He warned in an interview published by El Pais that this is make-or-break year for the constitutional project.

If efforts were to fail, he added, the work of the convention that drew up the draft constitution last year would be "water under the bridge."

At a summit meeting in Brussels in December, EU leaders failed to adopt the draft constitution put before them for their approval, leaving it to Ireland as current holder of the EU presidency to work out a compromise.

The constitution is meant to provide a framework for the enlargement of the EU from 15 to 25 members on May 1. But it has been stymied by the refusal of two middle-ranking countries, Spain and Poland, to give up what others describe as lopsided voting privileges.

Prodi said he was concerned that the three big powers at their recent summit meeting in Berlin had not considered the constitution a priority.

He said they were probably waiting for Ireland to finish consultations, but added: "Of course, I would feel happier if the three big countries would give a big push toward conclusion, and launch an invitation to close this long process.

"I believe that this year will be crucial, vital for the constitution," Prodi said. "If we do not complete it this year, the work of the Convention will be water under the bridge. If we do not move forward, I fear that within a few months some will start saying that new things have happened, that the world's political situation has changed, and that we will have to start anew from nothing."

Prodi said he had no problems with the proposals made at the three-way meeting, which called for the appointment of a European commissioner with sweeping powers to push through a series of reforms aimed at making the bloc the most competitive region in the world by 2010.

French President Jacques Chirac, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and British Prime Minister Tony Blair also proposed measures to stimulate economic growth, promote research and innovation, cut red tape, coordinate patent laws and provide better access to risk capital, all within a tight spending framework.

Prodi said the commission he heads, which is the EU's executive body, had already made similar proposals, and that therefore the conclusions of the Berlin meeting went "in the right direction."

Smaller European countries were angered by the Berlin meeting which, rather than an attempt to cut through red tape, they saw as an attempt by the big powers to impose their control on the EU.

Prodi withheld judgement. "We will see," he said, whether the Berlin meeting was an attempt to impose a directorate of three or would keep the door open to other countries.

"I hope that it is an open-door offering," he said, "and therefore, I hope also that among its initiatives is a joint reflection on the constitution."

Prodi said that a "positive dynamic" could ensue if the three big countries are open to the rest of the community. If not, he warned, "confrontation will arise."

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