

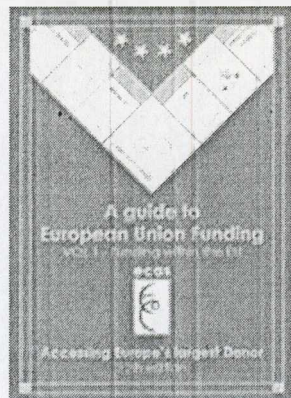
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EU 'wise' group welcomes new debate on constitution

05.10.2006 - 17:13 CET | By Mark Beunderman

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - Members of a select group of EU politicians tackling the bloc's constitutional deadlock have told EUobserver they are open to changes to the EU constitution, welcoming the fact that French minister Sarkozy recently re-opened the debate on the charter.

The circle of high-profile European politicians led by Italian interior minister Giuliano Amato last weekend (29-30 September) held its first meeting in Rome, with two members of the group telling EUobserver after the talks that they have no taboos.

"The substance of the EU constitution is more important than its form," said Belgian MEP and former prime minister Jean-Luc Dehaene who was one of the senior architects of the charter rejected by French and Dutch voters last year.

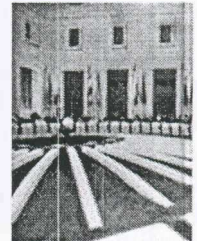
Another member of the group, Spanish centre-right MEP Inigo Mendez de Vigo, said the Rome meeting had welcomed recent proposals by French interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy for a "mini treaty" made up of only parts of the constitution.

"We discussed the proposal of Mr Sarkozy and we thought it was a good initiative," he said.

"We may not fully agree with it but it made a difference that a French politician who has important responsibilities takes the initiative himself of saying: this is what I think. We appreciated the fact that Mr Sarkozy has gone into the arena."

Mr Mendez de Vigo added that another plan by Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt to create a nucleus of closely integrated eurozone states, was also mentioned by participants as "another proposal that we have."

But the text of the constitution remains an important point of departure for the group which will hold its next conclave in December, the Spanish politician indicated.



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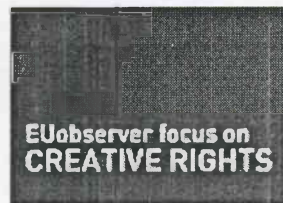
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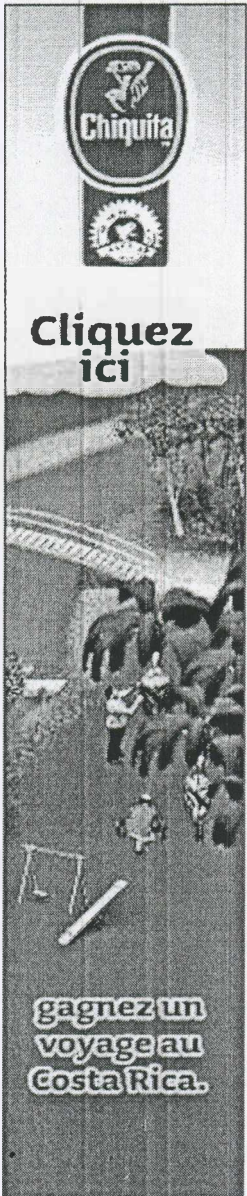
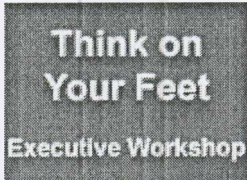
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"We will think for the next meeting: what are the essential parts of the constitution? What is really essential in the constitution for Europe to work in the forthcoming years?"

Vitorino joins group

The Amato group includes two former prime ministers - Paavo Lipponen of Finland and Wim Kok of the Netherlands - as well as two European commissioners Danuta Hubner (regional policy) and Margot Wallstrom (communications) - and German interior minister Wolfgang Schauble plus his predecessor Otto Schily.

France also has two participants - former foreign minister Michel Barnier and former finance minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn - while UK ex-commissioner Chris Patten is another prominent member.

Mr Mendez de Vigo said the group will soon be joined by Antonio Vitorino, a Portuguese ex-commissioner, plus one member from a Baltic state and one from a central European country, bringing the total number of 'wise' men and women to 14.

The group, which will produce a report just before next year's June EU leaders summit on the constitution, strongly stresses its independence, having its own €100,000 budget provided by the German Bosch Foundation.

"We are a group of private participants," said Mr Dehaene, with commission officials stressing that Ms Hubner and Ms Wallstrom are participating "in their private capacity."

High political stakes

But the political weight of the group is highlighted by the fact that both Germany and France have two members, each representing the main centre-right and centre-left political forces.

Germany in particular has high stakes in the group, as it holds the EU presidency in the first half of next year and is tasked with making concrete proposals on how to deal with the shelved constitution.

"We know that others will deal with decisions," said Mr Mendez de Vigo.

"We started from the idea that the German presidency has to make a proposal on the procedure, but also, surely, on content [of a new treaty]. Our motto is: we'll try to give you a hand."

Clarification - The article was published previously with the title, "EU 'wise' group welcomes Sarkozy constitution initiative." This was not meant to imply that the group welcomed the detail of Mr Sarkozy's proposal but welcomed the opening of the debate, as is clear from the quotations in the article itself.

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