

## **Hearing on Europe 2006 – An English Summary**

Over the last weekend in April, 410 Danish electors, selected to broadly represent Danish citizens, discussed the future of the European Union with experts and leading politicians. The Hearing was arranged as a democratic experiment by the Danish Parliament in cooperation with one of the leading Danish TV-stations. The large majority of the participants were very constructive and seriously critical of the cooperation with the European Union, and a majority was open to accept Turkey, the Balkan states and the Ukraine in the future. The media covered the Hearing intensively, and both participants and politicians profited substantially from the arrangement. The Danish Prime Minister finds the results very encouraging and is going to present them to the Union.

By Jacob Andersen

“The solution of the problems of Europe might be found in Bjergby, one of Denmark’s smallest villages” wrote the “Dagbladet Holstebro-Struer”, one of Denmark’s small local newspapers, on April 20, after that a Bjergby citizen had been appointed to participate in the people’s Hearing about the European Union.

This was, of course, a joke. But not just a joke. Folketinget, the Danish Parliament, had budgeted more than 2 million Euro for involving Danish electors in discussions during the Union’s official pause for thought. The people’s Hearing was to be the most important initiative in this respect. It was planned to gather 400 citizens from all over the country and make sure that the great European questions would be discussed between each and every neighbour in the kingdom. And if the solution was not to be found in Bjergby, where would it be?

The headlines of the debate were written by all parties of Parliament in cooperation with nine popular Danish movements engaged in European issues. The citizens were supposed to make a list of priorities of the transfrontier challenges to European countries and define the Union’s role in their solution. They were also expected to suggest an answer to the Union’s biggest internal problem, namely how the Union should deal with the neighbouring countries wanting to become members of the Union.

The aim of the debate was not only to arouse the interest of the Danish people and show that the politicians want a dialogue, but also to pave the way for opinions that would be more broadly founded with the electors than the usual opinion polls and contributions by representatives of the different sides.

The Hearing took place at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense and was arranged by the Parliament and one of the two leading TV-stations, the TV2. Both the Parliament and Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen had promised in advance to comment on the results of the Hearing. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister had also promised to make the citizens’ opinions known to the European Council at its meeting in June.

### **The Method of Hearing**

The Europe Hearing 2006 was inspired by the American method called Deliberative Poll. The basic model was developed by an American, Professor James S. Fishkin. The basic idea is to combine two democratic ideals – deliberation and representativeness.

Deliberation means to balance different points of view of and considerations for the participants in the discussion. This is done by having the participants stating their arguments to defend their opinions, listening to one another and thus obtaining more substantial knowledge of the subject in discussion.

The participants should represent all political convictions in the entire population, and preferably also be like the electors.

The Hearing runs over a weekend, and the participants will, on beforehand, receive a package of neutral information. It is imperative that the entire arrangement is neutral to the subject in discussion. Therefore, politicians and experts are selected in a way to ensure that all sides are equally represented, as far as at all possible.

In the Hearing proper the participants have discussions in small groups. They will also meet experts and leading politicians in the plenary sessions, where they are free to put questions to them directly. Before and during the Hearing, and in its final session, the participants receive a questionnaire with a series of questions. The participants represent a variety of opinions among the citizens, whose opinions will appear from the answers on the final questionnaires, and give an impression of what they would have said if they had got the chance to participate in a similar process with optimum settings for information and discussion.

The people's Hearing is an advanced form of opinion poll making possible subsequent statistical work-up of very large quantities of data about the electors' quite detailed opinions. It differs considerably from the well-known situation, when you are called by an opinion poll institute while you are cooking dinner with a crying baby on your arm. A hearing gives you a chance to prepare yourself and recall what you actually do know.

At the same time the event is extensively covered by the media, ranging from the Dagbladet Holstebro-Struer and other local newspapers to the national TV-stations.

## **Transfrontier Consciousness**

During March, 2006, 2,505 citizens, selected as a representative group, were called by the survey institute Epinion. They were questioned about a number of European objectives and invited to participate in the Hearing. A good half of them accepted or indicated interest in participating. The survey was meant to be a point of reference for the results. At the same time it was to create a focus of the debate at the Hearing proper, defining the subjects considered most important by the citizens.

The programme for the weekend, the informative material for the participants and the press, and not least the questionnaires were designed to generate exact answers from the citizens to the subjects which they themselves had prioritized.

The citizens listed 15 transfrontier challenges illustrating different political views on Europe. They were asked to give points according to the amount of energy they found the politicians ought to spend on the different challenges.

In general the answers deny that the electors are only interested in everyday problems. Danish electors' interest in transfrontier problems is significant. The following four subjects were chosen as those demanding the greatest attention:

- international terrorism
- transfrontier environment problems
- research and technological development
- social security in Europe.

International crime was close to the top-4 list of subjects, receiving more than 80 out of 100 possible points.

Next were a number of subjects, ranged approximately equally by the citizens, i.e. about 70 out of 100 points. Among these were safe energy supply, immigration control, strengthening of the competitiveness of Europe, furthering of common foreign policy and cooperation with the developing countries, dealing with conflicts round Europe and strengthening democracy and human rights outside the Union. Also the protection of consumers' rights was a top priority.

In the final session the participants were put the same questions, in order to compare their answers before and after the Hearing. The result shows that the basic priorities are quite stable. Biggest progress happened for the subject "furthering a common foreign policy", while the subjects originally of low priority, such as "conservation of the national characteristics" and "handling of infectious diseases" were pushed further down the list.

### **Who should take action?**

Who should face the challenges? The European Union or the member countries or maybe some kind of united efforts?

The last mentioned possibility was preferred by Danish electors, however, they distinguished very clearly between different areas and issues.

In general, less than 10 per cent found that the Union should not play any role in these respects.

In some areas the Union was wanted to be more active. In other areas it should be up to the member states – or somewhere in between.

The Union should play a greater role than today in areas such as transfrontier environment problems and research and technological development; this was the opinion of more than three out of four participants. And nearly two out of three found that energy, terrorism and crime issues demand a greater effort by the Union.

In other five areas about half of the participants indicate that action by the Union is needed: immigration, common European foreign policy, intensified support to and trade with the developing countries, consumer protection and democracy-furthering efforts outside the Union.

Social security, conflicts in the neighbouring areas, competitiveness, conservation of national characteristics as well as handling of infectious diseases, however, do not demand more action by the Union, - according to the majority.

The electors seem no longer to consider the distribution of tasks as a balance, where more powers to the Union means less work for the member states. A greater role of the Union does not necessarily mean a reduction of the member states' role. As an example, more than 70 per cent of the participants find that the individual member states should do more to intensify research and further technological development.

## **Critical Danes**

The telephone interviews gave an impression of how seriously the citizens take 13 of the items of criticism, often heard in public debate. The points of criticism were to cover different aspects of the European political spectrum and ranged from subjects such as insufficient control of the Union's budget, over reforms wanted of the common agricultural policy, to excessive national egotism and too little breadth of view.

The citizens also had the possibility of prioritizing different aspects of what is often called the Union's democracy deficit. Do the small countries have too little to say, do the citizens or the elected politicians have too little influence on today's Union?

The survey interviews left no doubt that the Danes - in spite of their wish to use the Union more than is the case today - are quite critical of many aspects of the work of the Union. The criticism was not only found with the so-called sceptics, it was rather general. The participants did not become less critical during the discussions, where among other things, they could discuss the points of criticism with Foreign Minister Per Stig Møller, four outstanding Danish experts, politicians known to be critical of the Union, and the President of the Commission, Mr. J.M. Barroso, who was interviewed through a video link, shown on a big screen.

The top scores in this connection were the complicated working procedures of the Union, insufficient control of the Union's budget, and the non-existing reforms of agricultural support. These issues were given more than 80 points out of 100.

Excessive national egotism, insufficient debate across borders and too limited citizen influence got about 2 out of 3 points. Lowest - however not very low - was the criticism of too little influence by the small member states. This issue got about 50 out of 100 points.

This last issue was one of few examples of a marked change in priorities between the telephone survey before the Hearing and the final questionnaires: the influence of the small member states was seen as a lesser problem, whereas the insufficient control of the budget advanced by as much as 11 points, as compared with the survey before the Hearing.

The Union's complicated working procedures got the highest priority in the citizens' criticism during the telephone survey. Therefore the debate had simplification as an important issue during discussions and on the questionnaires.

## **Simplification is not all that simple**

More than half of the participants agree partly or completely that the working procedures of the Union should be made simpler by appointing a foreign minister to be the Union's face externally. The majority also prefers to abolish the presidency rotation, to choose English as common language, and do with one single decision-making process in cases, where the members are unable to agree. On the other hand, only a little more than every three participants support fully or partly the suggestion of reducing the number of commissioners in such a way that the Commission cease to count one from each member state. Only every five participants would agree to a simplification by reducing the role of the European Parliament in the decision-making process.

It is true of most of the Union's internal problems that arguments exist both in favour of and against simplification. Therefore, after the debate, the participants were asked to choose sides in a series of dilemmas on the path towards a more simple Union. It was done by mentioning on the questionnaire two different views on the issue. They were asked to choose the view to which they were more inclined to agree.

It turned out that

- A large majority of the participants were *not* willing to simplify the decision-making processes at the cost of influence of the small member states.
- Six out of ten participants found that there should be limits to the simplification of procedures, in order to ensure that citizens, enterprises and politicians from all of the 25 countries keep their influence on them.
- Three quarters of the participants value greater transparency of the procedures in the Union higher than the possibility of more efficient solutions.
- Just below two thirds of the participants find that the national parliaments should be involved from the beginning in future amendments to the Treaty – even if it might cause difficulties in negotiating a compromise.

The general impression of the answers is that the participants value the openness and transparency of the Union very much. It is not enough that the Union makes decisions on which the members already agree. But a simplification should, however, not be at the cost of the present influence on decisions by enterprises, citizens, politicians and the small member states.

## **The European Union and the Neighbours**

Where do the Union's borders go? Which new countries should be accepted as members or as cooperation partners? What are the most important criteria in the balancing of arguments for and against membership of a potential member state? That was the main issue in the last third of the Hearing, when the participants had their group discussions as well as a chance for putting questions to a panel of politicians.

The participants were asked to define the most important criteria for acceptance of applicant states. The most important condition would be democracy, as well as legal and human rights. Those conditions were considered beyond discussion. Also the possibility to secure peace and stability was an important argument. The next argument was that membership should be to the benefit of the economic development of the applicant state. Further down on the list of priorities was the advantage of citizens and enterprises being able to set up businesses across national borders. On the bottom of the list are two demands: that the applicant state should be predominantly Christian, and have a culture similar to the Danish one.

The participants answered to exactly the same questions prior to the Hearing, and there were few changes afterwards. In general, a moderately greater tolerance was observed after the Hearing, when almost all criteria for membership seemed a little less strict. E.g. the Christianity criterion only got 30 out of 100 points after the Hearing. On the other hand there was a somewhat growing worry that a larger Union might cause its work to stagnate.

A more detailed analysis of the answers show that the participants disagree most about whether some countries on the European continent should be excluded from the European Union, and about the two issues dealing with religion and culture. These very statements divide the population, and more significantly so than most of the rest of the questions.

The participants were also asked to evaluate a number of specific neighbouring countries' relations to the Union, either in the form of a real membership or as extended cooperation.

The participants' answers show a considerably differentiated attitude as far as the question of membership is concerned. On one hand no country has the majority against it, on the other hand there is only a majority in favour of accepting Norway, Iceland and Switzerland as members as soon as possible. All the rest of the countries might be accepted in the future, according to the majority.

The participants are most sceptical as to Belarus, 44 per cent being of the opinion that this country should never become a member. The same goes for Georgia, the Ukraine and Turkey, according to 32 per cent of the participants. The traditional Danish opinion polls have up to now never showed a majority in favour of Turkey as a member state. In this connection, however, as much as 56 per cent find that Turkey might be a member eventually.

### **Extensive Media Coverage**

The majority of the electors have learned about the Hearing one way or another. There were a good 3 hours' of TV transmission before and during the event. The TV2 station dominated, but also Denmark's Radio and some regional stations brought features. Most of the viewers watched the Hearing in the TV2 News on Saturday and Sunday evenings, watched by more than 760,000 viewers. A summary on Saturday evening was watched by 105,000. An extensive interview with Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen in Denmark's Radio on May 3 was watched by 564,000. The TV2 internet channel called Sputnik let the especially interested viewer follow the Hearing live and non-stop. There were 11 hours' of streamed computer TV with features ranging from group discussions to plenary sessions.

In the period up to May 5 the media brought between 100 and 200 mentions in all. The written press was a good mixture of articles, readers' letters, discussion articles, and in depth analyses. Also a feature article and two leading articles were published, one of them written by a very influential political commentator, Mr. Erik Meier Carlsen, editor in chief of the tabloid paper B.T. "The People's Hearing is by its form and as a possible tool in development of a modern, political debating culture so important that it deserves much attention." ("Folket h res"/"The people is heard", B.T. April 29).

Another remarkable example was a feature article on May 12, in the Politiken, one of the great morning papers, written by two outstanding personalities in Danish European debate through many years: Former Secretary General of the European Council of Ministers through 14 years, Mr. Niels Ersb ll, and the Nestor among Union sceptics, Mr. Jens Peter Bonde, Member of the European Parliament.

The feature article made a number of proposals with a view to improving democracy in the Union, the authors having been inspired by the Hearing: "The discussions at the public Hearing arranged by Parliament and TV2 was a very good experience to us," they wrote.

And they went on: “Ordinary Danes chosen at random know much more about the European Union than many in Brussels would believe. Denmark ought to try to persuade other member states to take up this idea, and we ought to make such Hearings a regular element in the national discussions of the development of the Union”.

### **Committed Participants**

380 participants were foreseen, but there turned out to be 419. The great interest demonstrated by the participants during the entire arrangement denies the prejudice that ordinary citizens are not interested in discussing the European Union. The same goes for the answers to the first questionnaire, asking the participants to tell what was their most important reason for accepting the Parliament’s invitation.

One third of the participants mentioned the chance of learning something about the work of the European Union as the most important reason to participate. Another third accepted the invitation because they were interested in the subject. But every six participants stated that the most important thing for them was that it is a civic duty to participate in this kind of event.

The final questionnaire asked the participants to describe their experience of the event. As a whole the participants express great enthusiasm for the Europe Hearing 2006. To describe the profit of their participation 9 out of 10 participants gave the marks of 7, 8 or 9 on a 1-9 scale. Just one person would not recommend anyone to participate in similar future events.

More than 9 out of 10 found that their understanding of the Union had been improved. Four out of five found that their opinion on the Union had become more qualified, and nine out of ten felt that they did now better understand different opinions on the Union. It should be noted that this has happened in an atmosphere where only about one tenth of the participants felt any urge to change their attitude in some specific direction.

As one 70 year-old man described his experience after six hours’ intensive group work in one of the 21 groups: “I was kind of surprised at myself. Normally I am pretty tough and tend to bully other people. But here I have been listening to people and talking with people, with whom I really disagree. I have even learned something from them. In fact I am quite proud of myself, because for the first time I have been able to control myself in a political discussion.”

After the Hearing a good 20 professional process consultants were asked to explain the success of this process. Their answers could be summed up as follows:

- **The participants felt that they were taken seriously.** We observed with the participants a feeling of having been specially chosen to participate, as well as a belief that they were taken seriously by both organizers and politicians. In general they felt that they were addressed with respect and treated as the key figures they actually were. They replied to this by reacting constructively and with commitment. Such confidence fully depends on the entire event signalling respect for the participants right down into detail.
- **Clear ground rules.** Right from the beginning the participants were told that the group was supposed to exchange views, not to end up being of the same opinion. Every single opinion should be heard and respected, everyone was encouraged to talk in a way that would encourage others to listen, and listen in a way that would encourage others to talk. And that was what happened. At any rate 92 per cent declared afterwards that the discussions in the group were characterized by attention to the arguments put forward by the others.

- **A Safe Base.** The participants met four times in all in the same group. Which meant that they had excellent opportunities to build up knowledge of and confidence in each other. The result was often a strong feeling of loyalty within the group, which encouraged many of them to speak, both in the group and in front of the 400 participants (as well as buzzing TV-cameras).
- **Absence of Political Prejudice.** Many participants stated spontaneously that it was a great relief to discuss with other persons without knowing their political basis. This meant that the participants faced each other as *persons*, rather than as stereotypes, such as a “traditional conservative”, “typical sceptics”, etc.

Last, but not least: Most people are actually interested in the world surrounding them, and even though they do not know all the treaties by heart, they do know which principles and values they most believe in. By far most of the people are willing and able to learn and have their prejudices challenged, provided it is done in a decent way.

This last observation corresponds very well with the participants’ answers to the second question. Many are of the opinion that if you want to discuss the European Union with the electors, you have to talk about their everyday problems. They did not in this event. According to the participants, arguments were first and foremost put forward with a view to what was best for Europe. Of secondary importance were arguments considering what was advantageous for Denmark; arguments made from the point of view of personal advantage ranged lowest..

## **Political Reactions**

Leading politicians reacted very positively to the Hearing. Christian Mejdahl, who is the Speaker of Parliament, and who participated in most of the Saturday programme, called the Hearing a “successful arrangement (...) not least because of the participants’ great commitment and seriousness in connection with the sometimes quite difficult subjects on the agenda”.

The chairperson of the permanent Europe committee of Parliament, Mrs. Elisabeth Arnold, who participated the entire weekend, much appreciated the report of the participants’ answers to the questions. This report forms part of the Europe committee’s present negotiations aiming at a Danish conclusion of the first round of the Union’s pause for thought:

“I guarantee that this is interesting reading, and the participants have read the report with great interest. The report gives a unique picture of Danish views on a series of European questions, and it gives the members of Parliament food for thought within a lot of areas. During this pause the politicians have wanted to listen to the citizens’ views concerning the Union, and the Europe Hearing 2006 has delivered a marked and essential contribution,” Elisabeth Arnold writes.

Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Foreign Minister Per Stig Møller describe the results of the event as “interesting and encouraging”. It can be read in their common contribution, which was previously published in the *Jyllands-Posten*, Denmark’s biggest morning newspaper. Both authors note that the Hearing does not “draw a picture of Denmark as divided into two, as has been the general impression after the big referenda, demonstrating a big anti-EU group as opposed to a big in-favour-of-the-EU group of the population”.

“It is rather the impression that a broad majority of Danes share a fundamentally positive, but still critical and in all circumstances realistic attitude to the EU,” they write. They agree to the criticism of the Union’s insufficient control of its budget and the slowness in the handling of agricultural reforms. They find the citizens’ criticism of the Union’s complicated procedures quite balanced.

Simplification and transparency in the Union's legislation are needed, but the complicated procedures are often due to the fact that countries such as Denmark are unwilling to leave the same powers to the Union in all cases. They find that the citizens' order of priority of the transfrontier challenges is well in keeping with the government.

Also the conclusions of the Hearing concerning the Union's continued expansion is described as "realistic and down-to-earth." The Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister both find it right to particularly stress democracy, as well as legal and human rights in connection with the decision of membership for new states. They claim that the expansion of the Union has through history been the central - and very successful - instrument in the efforts to extend the freedom, safety and prosperity of Western Europe. But they also find that "the expansion policy has its limitations". "We shall have to consider the Union's ability to absorb new members more seriously. The European Union should keep its coherence and ability to make decisions," they write, suggesting to establishing a "pan-European economic area," where the European Union may carry on free trade and cooperate with its neighbours.

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*The summary has been translated into English by Hanne Kjærgaard.*