

Amazing! After all of these years of being the biggest political yawn, Europe has become exciting. We have a battle that really matters on our hands over an institution that costs us a packet and affects the lives of billions every single day.

Even better this "crisis" was triggered not political leaders or business chiefs, but by ordinary people, the voters who rejected the European constitution. That pleases me as I still haven't got over the lack of influence that those huge anti-war rallies had on Blair's decision to invade Iraq. At least on this occasion, governments have listened.

The "No" vote on the constitution gave an excuse to re-examine the EU's direction and particularly to look again at the enormous Common Agricultural Policy budget, even though Britain had already agreed to the current programme of spending. Then the debate spun from finances to "What's the EU for anyway?"

For the people who feel remote from the enormous, complex and costly corridors of European power, here is an opportunity to turn Europe into something more to your liking, although the opportunity mustn't be overblown: the EU is a huge liner- very slow to turn.

It is, however, in a constant state of evolution. It began as a mechanism for maintaining peace in Europe by intertwining the key industries of coal and steel production in states that had been at war. That economic integration continually increased, of course, although the motivation now seems to be making life easier for big businesses.

What role do we want for its future? Should it be a free trade zone alone? Should there be greater political integration with the appointment of a foreign minister for Europe? Should it continue to grow, taking in countries such as Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina? As Sir David Hannay, a former ambassador to the EU, reminded Radio Four listeners, the EU can still play a role in preserving peace in Europe. It was only a decade ago that we witnessed the horrendous war in the Balkans and now those Balkan states are on the path for integration into a Europe that has democracy and tolerance as founding principles. It might not be wise to turn those nations away from a club that forces the heads of state to the discussion table rather than to councils of war.

But what about Turkey? It has a poor human rights record and only five years ago, there were fears that there might be another military coup. In five years' time, it will have more people than Germany, the most populous European nation. This could have a tremendous effect on European labour markets. So should Turkey be welcomed into the den?

These are big questions and at last the people of Europe might have more say in providing the answers.