

There is no ducking the significance of the French referendum on the European constitution or the "No" vote expected too be delivered by the Dutch today. Between them, they will have not only torn up the map, they will have chucked away the compass too.

This will make it very difficult for Europe's leaders when they gather on June 16 to ask "Where do we go from here?". This question is all the more difficult to answer because of the broad spectrum of people that have rejected this treaty. Lefties and supporters of the racist Le Pen were united - for once - although they opposed the treaty for very different reasons. Reasons for objecting to the treaty vary between countries too. In Britain, there is concern over too much regulation of business. In France, there was concern that too much power had been ceded to business and that opening up markets to greater competition would lead to more French job losses.

Free markets is a tack that has been pushed hard by the British government. Labour believes that it is creating the lean, efficient, hard-working workforce that might stand a chance against China's army of cheap workers and India where companies have access to well-educated, English-speaking staff at a fraction of the cost of British workers. Our government believes that France and Germany must undergo the same changes that we have here - and that is precisely what some of the French "No" voters rejected. Even with unemployment running at ten per cent, they have declined to take Blair's medicine and it's no surprise: the live-to-work culture of Britain is a poor advertisement for his remedy. The French want their own solution to the problem of unemployment instead of Blair's bitter pill pushed down their throat.

This is the one common thread that emerges from the mass of reasons -often contradictory - behind people's rejection of the treaty: voters are objecting to a loss of control over their lives.

European institutions have come to symbolise powerful, remote government that few people understand, let alone influence. It's unfair to blame all of this on Brussels. European institutions have been convenient fall-guys for unpopular decisions that national governments want to take. However, they are part of the process of taking power away from the most local level of governments, the ones with which people can most easily identify, understand and change, and giving it to institutions that are complex, remote, and vast.

We need to strip down the European institutions so that they are only dealing with issues that can only be effectively tackled on an international scale. Power should handed back to local governments.

Until this happens, referendum results will continue to reject the European institutions and increasing numbers of people will fail to vote until governments of all levels lose their legitimacy.