Like many other referendums, last Thursday's EU poll has shown that binary voting can be inadequate and inaccurate.  The methodology is also divisive so, all but inevitably, campaigning was adversarial and, actually, horrible; secondly, in the vote itself, while many people voted positively, lots only said what they were *against*.

In Germany, "constructive" votes ask those who oppose option ***A*** to propose an alternative, option ***B***.  A similar process in the UK would have asked those opposed to the UK being in the EU to suggest that the UK should be in the EEA perhaps, or independent of both the EU and EEA, or whatever.   So maybe a multi-option ballot would have been required.  Such 'positive thinking' could well have been the catalyst for a more constructive debate.

And now accuracy.  Well, the average 'age of a people' cannot be determined by a majority vote.   Indeed, with a binary question like "Are you young or old?" the answer is bound to be wrong.  With a ten-option choice, however - "Are you in your twenties, thirties, or whatever?" - with everyone voting positively, an accurate answer could indeed be ascertained 'democratically'.

A similar principle should apply when trying to determine the "will of the people".  The ballot paper should have included a set of options.  When New Zealand debated its electoral system in 1992, an independent commission drew up a short list - FPTP, PR-STV, and three in the middle - and the resulting referendum contained *five* options.  So (almost) everyone was able to vote positively, and the outcome was indeed a much more accurate reflection of the collective will.

If, then, the lessons of last week's events are to be learnt, future referendums should be multi-option ballots, with the various options set (as in New Zealand) independently.  A second lesson would suggest that, as befits a plural society in a pluralist democracy, controversial matters in Stormont should also be subject to (preference) votes on a plurality of options.

Yours etc.