

EMBARGOED UNTIL 20.30 HRS  
TUESDAY MARCH 16, 1976.  
NOT TO BE USED BY MEDIA OR ON  
CLUB TAPES UNTIL 20.30 HRS

March 16, 1976

Speech by the Rt. Hon George Thomson, Member of the Commission for Regional Affairs, addressing the Newspaper Society, the Association of Publishers of the regional and local press in the UK at the Grosvenor Hotel, Chester.

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"Now that Britain has unequivocally decided to remain in the European Community, the task of the news media in reporting Brussels takes on an entirely new dimension.

The Community is no longer "them and us", it is no longer a lot of foreigners over there on the other side of the Channel, whom we have to decide whether to join or not.

Community affairs have ceased to be foreign affairs and have become part of British domestic policy. Brussels has become partly a British city. It is as if the seat of our Government instead of straddling the Thames, now straddles the Straits of Dover. Everyday decisions about everyday things - the price of butter, the supply of our fish and chips, the job prospects for our youngsters - which have for generations been taken in Whitehall, are now taken partly in Whitehall and partly in Brussels.

More than £800 million of grants and loans has now flowed from Brussels into the towns and villages of Britain. It includes money to build a tunnel under the Thames estuary and the Great Kielder Reservoir in the North - both saving the overburdened ratepayers useful sums of money. It includes cash to resettle redundant steel workers or to save miners' lives, to help combat poverty in our cities or to assist migrants to settle to our way of life.

When I announce a £30 million grant of Community Regional Fund money to help build new factories and provide new jobs we are lucky to get a few lines for general announcement in the great national newspapers, so blasé have we become about mere millions. But scores of the individual announcements are front page news in scores of provincial and local papers.

We shall try to the limit of our means to improve our services to the provincial press. I hope that you will look at the possibility of improving your own coverage in Brussels, perhaps by cooperative arrangements, or by more frequent visits.

I recognise that the costs of maintaining a correspondent have become heavier and heavier as the £ has fallen, but it remains a pity that the British provincial newspapers should be missing when so many provincial papers from other Community countries have representatives in Brussels.

ISEC/10/1976

The Germans, for example, have numerous correspondents, based permanently in Brussels, whose regional papers give prominent coverage to the day to day activities of the Community. They rightly see these activities as being of fundamental domestic interest to the average German citizen.

The European Community is no longer the mysterious preserve of the mandarins of the Foreign Office, the workplace of some hundreds of humdrum civil servants. It has ceased to be simply a story for the diplomatic correspondents and become increasingly a matter of normal newspaper reporting.

Day by day things are happening in Community offices which are local news in Kidderminster, or Cheshire or Newcastle - if only there were anyone in Brussels to spot the story. But the British provincial press - the most vigorous and most prosperous branch of our newspaper industry - is virtually unrepresented in Brussels.

I know of provincial newspaper groups who maintain a dozen men in the House of Commons, each with their own regional parish to look after, but not a single fulltime reporter in Brussels where there is a growing flow of regional news.

Even the Press Association remains unrepresented, still taking the old fashioned view that Brussels is "abroad" and therefore the preserve of Reuters, who have to write for the whole world and not for British consumption.

Yet Brussels today is as much a centre of British news as is Birmingham. The European Community tries to fill this vacuum by its own information service.

We have information offices in every capital in the Community but we have recognised the importance of bringing home the reality of the Community to the citizens of the latest major recruit to the EEC by opening information offices in Cardiff and Edinburgh, as in London. Good cooperation is being built up with the provincial press, both the dailies and the local weeklies.

The big task remains to give the activities of the European Community a good deal more ~~an~~ appeal. We have an infinite capacity in Brussels for making a simple problem extremely complicated.

We need a deliberate and conscious effort to create a Europe of the common man and woman, not of the technocrats - and to explain it in plain straightforward language.

The Community will be judged by the ordinary citizen over the next few years, more than anything else by two things. First the contribution it is able to make to dealing with the new scourge of technological unemployment, particularly amongst the young. Second how far it enables the voice of the housewife to be heard - and heeded - in the Community, especially in regard to excessive surpluses of food. The farmer deserves a fair deal, but so does the consumer, and a new balance needs to be struck between them.

Apart from these fundamental considerations, there are other important ways in which the Community's appeal can be widened.

The Belgian Prime Minister in an almost forgotten chapter of his report to the April European Summit, puts forward a number of good ideas for a citizens' Europe, which I hope will be followed up by the Heads of Government. We must make Europe real in human terms, by enabling people to travel around the Community as easily as they can travel in their own country. A European passport, backed by easy-to-use health service arrangements for travellers will show in a convincing way that we are citizens of Europe as well as nationals of our own country. We must get rid of the curtain of red tape that still too often faces the traveller

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at the internal frontiers of the Community. I sometimes think the mountain of "bumph" is a more serious problem for us than the mountain of butter which from time to time unlike the paper melts away.

I go walking on the German frontier in the Ardennes, where a section of the Siegfried Line once stood bristling with barbed wire and pill boxes. Today the battlefield is a trans-border natural park and you can walk back and forward across the frontier without ever being stopped for a passport. That symbolises the European Community for me a lot more than the dusty dossiers in the pigeon holes of the Council of Ministers.

But for our young people the Siegfried Line is as much a mysterious ancient monument as an Aztec temple. They take for granted that the Continent is a playground and not a battlefield. They need new and contemporary reasons for acquiring a European sense of identity.

I would like to see an imaginative programme of educational exchanges mounted for our young people. Both Britain and France know how much education has brought their respective overseas commonwealths together.

Nothing comparable takes place at Community level. I would like to see sixth-formers spending a whole term in each other's school, university professors exchanging chairs and a Community scholarship scheme on the same mutual help basis we have with the existing Commonwealth scholarship plan.

As one travels around the Continent, every little town has at its entrance a welcoming board telling which town elsewhere in the Community is its twin. The cumulative effect is considerable. We go in for town-twinning, but rarely for making the fact visible to all. Couldn't the Local Authority Associations give a lead here?

The European Court of Justice took up an air stewardess's case the other day and delivered a devastating judgement in favour of equal pay for women. As Europe becomes bigger and more complex, we must strengthen Community machinery to safeguard individual rights.

All this - the Community of the common man - will receive a great impetus from the establishment of direct elections to the European Parliament. The powers of the Parliament will still remain to be fought for and the underlying problems of getting national governments to agree on bringing their nine national economies together will remain as forbidding as ever. Nevertheless, once direct elections are underway, things will never be the same again. A direct link will have been forged between the citizen and his community. For the provincial press this will be a challenge and an opportunity, just as much as it will be for national leaders or for European Commissioners. "

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