



*European Communities
Commission
Press Release*

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Speech by Mr Christopher Tugendhat, EEC Commissioner responsible for the Budget, at a lunch given by the English Speaking Union in London on November 4.

Yesterday, in the Queen's speech, the British Government announced its intention to reintroduce in the new session at Westminster its Bill for direct elections to the European Parliament. I think, therefore, that it would be timely for me to try to explain why I believe that the proposal to hold direct elections in 1978 is one of great importance, and why I believe it would be a matter for great regret if these elections were to be cancelled, or postponed in consequence of resistance in the House of Commons.

Summary of the case for direct elections

The argument for establishing a directly elected European Parliament rests essentially on two propositions. First, that the Community has now reached a stage of development where its activities significantly affect the lives of all its citizens, and that those citizens therefore have a clear right to expect that the main decision-making institutions of the Community - the Commission and the Council of Ministers - be made more fully accountable to them. And, second, that, in practice, only a directly elected European Parliament can realistically aspire effectively to secure this important extension of democratic political rights.

All the evidence suggests that these propositions enjoy very wide popular support. A recent opinion poll indicated that as many as 67% of the British population favour direct elections. Despite this, a number of United Kingdom politicians have declared their intention to do everything in their power to prevent such elections taking place, and it is important dispassionately to examine the reasons they have given for doing so.

Opposing arguments

For the most part, the opponents of direct elections have not overtly challenged the contention that the Community's citizens have a right to participate more fully in its decision-making procedures. Rather, they have argued that a directly elected Parliament is not the correct way of achieving this objective. For, they allege, such a supra-national body would deprive existing national Parliaments of a large measure of their legitimate influence and authority. They therefore recommend instead that greater democratic control be achieved by reforming the procedures of national parliaments, so that these bodies themselves are able more closely to scrutinise, and more substantially to influence, Community legislation.

In fairness to those who argue along these lines, there is certainly scope for involving national Parliaments more tellingly in the Community's affairs. In Britain, for example, the influence of the House of Commons in Community matters could, and should, be extended by ensuring that debates about them are held more frequently, less late at night, and more often upon substantive motions expressing approval or disapproval of a particular Community proposal, rather than upon resolutions merely to take note. It would also be sensible to extend the terms of reference of the House of Commons EEC Scrutiny Committee so that it is no longer prevented from producing detailed judgements about the merits of Community policy.

Making the Council corporately responsible

But what the opponents of direct elections fail to recognise are the severe limitations which must necessarily circumscribe the effectiveness of any attempt to impose greater democratic control over the Council and the Commission exclusively through the agency of national constitutional machinery, however much that machinery is improved.

The British House of Commons, the French Assemblée Nationale, the German Bundestag, and their counterparts in the other Member States can, and should, check and guide the actions of their individual national ministers when negotiating in the nine-member Council of Ministers. What these bodies cannot do is to question and influence the Council as a whole about the policies for which its members are collectively responsible.

National Parliaments necessarily have constitutional powers over a minister only in his capacity as a member of a national government. National MPs can ask Mr Silkin or Herr Ertl, for example, why they pursued a particular policy over agricultural prices, and whether or not they succeeded in the objectives to which their national governments are committed. But they cannot force the Council as a corporate body to explain why it reached particular decisions, which sections of society within the Community will gain or lose, or how those decisions fit in with other European policy objectives. Only a supra-national body organised on a Community basis can hope to perform the vitally necessary task of obliging the Council fully to explain and justify its corporate acts.

No encroachment on national Parliaments

Just because this is so, the effect of the European Parliament properly discharging this function, will not be to encroach upon the legitimate preserves of national Parliaments, but rather to secure an extension of democratic influence which otherwise could not take place. In my view, the powers and responsibilities of the national parliaments on the one hand, and the European Parliament on the other, should be complementary and not in opposition to each other. In making this point I am not in any sense prejudging the issue of how the Community should develop. The respective powers and importance of the national parliaments and the European Parliament will of course depend on the extent to which national governments are prepared to entrust the Commission and the Council with influence and authority.

The nomination system

But if there is a clear need for a supra-national representative body to whom the Commission and the Council are responsible, is it really necessary, it is sometimes asked, for that body to be directly elected? Isn't the advantage of the present system of having Euro-MPs nominated by national Parliaments from among their own members, that it ensures a close and harmonious

working relationship between the two tiers of parliamentary activity? Wouldn't it be possible to retain the existing method of selection and, if necessary, to increase the effectiveness of the present European Parliament simply by conferring upon it more extensive constitutional powers?

Certainly it is important to ensure that there are readily accessible channels of communication between European and national MPs, but there is no reason to suppose that this can only be achieved by a system of nomination. As far as the United Kingdom is concerned a variety of proposals worth serious consideration have been suggested as means of establishing a suitable link between directly elected European MPs and their national counterparts. One is Michael Stewart's plan for making Euro-MPs coopted non-voting members of the House of Commons. Another is Lord Carrington's scheme for reform of the House of Lords, in which Euro-MPs would be automatically elected to a new Second Chamber.

However, the crucial point is not that there are a number of ways in which a close relationship between national and European MPs can be preserved, but that the merits of the nomination system in this respect are more than offset by its serious drawbacks which at present greatly handicap the European Parliament - and would continue to do so whatever additional formal powers were conferred upon it.

Insufficient time

One difficulty which is inevitable when European MPs are also members of their national legislatures, is that they lack the time to give their European responsibilities the undivided attention which they require. Despite the impressive conscientiousness and dedication of European MPs, the need also to fulfil domestic parliamentary obligations has undoubtedly substantially reduced their ability to influence Community policy. It is true that British members of the directly elected European Parliament will almost certainly not be legally prohibited from sitting at Westminster as well - but very few individuals are likely to choose to do so. There is after all no prohibition on members of the House of Commons becoming members of the GLC or vice-versa, but in practice few have: most people prefer to do one important full time job well, rather than two inadequately.

Lack of popular legitimacy

An even more important deficiency of the nomination system is that a parliament based on selection rather than direct election cannot claim - whoever the selectors and the selected - to be fully democratic. This is not just a theoretical point. In practice, nomination has prevented the European public from accepting their Parliament as fully legitimate. And the consequent failure of Parliament to win enthusiastic public support has been another important factor restricting its capacity to make itself felt.

For one thing, Parliament's conspicuous lack of popular backing has inevitably affected the attitude towards it of the executive authorities it is supposed to check. But perhaps an even more important impediment has been the inhibiting effect that consciousness of the absence of outside support has had upon the attitudes of European MPs themselves. It is often not realised that the European Parliament already has, in some respects, quite extensive formal powers. Admittedly some of these, for example the power to reject the Budget completely, are not as significant as they appear, because they are too extreme for their use to be justified except in the rarest circumstances. But there can be little doubt that European MPs have also been restrained from exercising

in practice the power which they possess in theory by an understandable lack of moral confidence. Only the introduction of direct elections, by hugely increasing the European public's identification with its Parliament, can give European MPs sufficient conviction of the rightness of their cause to inspire them to assert their rights with maximum vigour.

A prerequisite of the Community's further progress

The greater democratic control of the Council and the Commission which direct elections will make possible, is a major reason for proceeding with them. But another point which should be emphasised is that in achieving this political advance, direct elections will almost certainly also bring in their wake other important gains for Europe's citizens.

At present one of the main reasons why the Community is so signally failing to bring to the people of Europe many of the benefits which it is potentially capable of conferring, is that its institutions are having to work in an atmosphere of intense public suspicion and distrust, arising largely from the widespread belief that those responsible for formulating Community policy are either too bureaucratically isolated on the one hand, or too susceptible to organised vested interests on the other. By increasing public identification with the European Parliament, and, at the same time increasing the Parliament's significance, direct elections should do much to allay understandable anxieties of this kind. Once the public is satisfied that Community policy will always be fully and publicly thrashed out, and to some extent, decided in a forum possessing the legitimacy which direct elections alone can confer, it will be willing much more easily to repose its trust in the Community and all its works. On the basis of that trust, it will, I believe, be possible for the Community to enter an entirely new and much more dynamic phase of development, bringing major benefits in a whole range of policy areas where at present little progress seems possible.

I hope then I have shown that a directly elected Parliament should not be seen as a constitutional luxury, as an ornate but unnecessary embellishment on the exterior of the European edifice. On the contrary, direct elections represent the indispensable means of securing both basic political rights, and also the Community's further progress.

Difficulties a directly elected Parliament must surmount

But, finally, I must enter a caveat. The benefits which I have suggested a directly elected Parliament can bring will not be achieved without difficulty. The new Parliament will consist of 410 members and will include people from many different national backgrounds; some of whom will have experience of their national legislatures, some of whom will not. In these circumstances, the Parliament can only hope to be effective if it resolves two substantial problems. First, it will need swiftly to devise efficient procedures to facilitate both the work of its plenary sessions and of its committees. The procedures employed by the existing Parliament will provide it with only limited guidance on how to do this - for the problems of a body consisting of only 198 members, which sits much less frequently than will a directly elected Parliament, are both different and less formidable.

Secondly, the Parliament will need to find a way of ensuring that it does not speak with too many voices. Little moral authority will be at the disposal of a body which is divided by a welter of conflicting factional or national viewpoints. If it is to command attention and respect, a directly elected Parliament will have to be capable of formulating a coherent and widely agreed view of how the Community should develop, and of the policies which it should pursue.

The European Democratic Union

One precondition of achieving this will be a reduction in the number of political groups at present sitting separately from each other in the European Parliament, and the emergence of a better organised party system.

Perhaps as a Conservative I may be allowed to conclude by saying how particularly concerned I am to see the development of closer cooperation between the parties of the Centre-Right; and how much, therefore, I welcome the proposed formation of the European Democratic Union, - an organisation bringing together European Centre-Right parties in countries both within and without the Community - which, it is now hoped, will be formally inaugurated shortly.

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