



Bitter debate on Spain

One of the most bitter debates in recent years marked the acceptance on September 25 by the Parliament of a Socialist resolution appealing for clemency for the eleven men and women condemned to death in Spain and also — despite Right Wing and Centre opposition — inviting the Commission and Council to freeze Community relations with Spain until freedom and democracy are established.

Parliament had three motions before it: that from the Socialists which combined an appeal for mercy, sharp criticism of the Spanish judicial and political systems, and the demand for Community action; another, more moderate, from the Christian Democrats and Liberals; a third, more extreme, from the Communists. In addition an amendment by Peter Kirk (Con/UK) and Christian de la Malène (EPD/F) was aimed at taking the political factor out of the Socialist resolution.

The division was clearcut between those (mainly on the Left) who wished to make an overt political judgment about the Spanish regime and those who wanted to limit Parliament's action to an appeal for mercy: for some Members because of the principle of non-interference in a country's internal affairs, for others because of a belief that a denunciation of the Spanish regime would lessen the chance of reprieve.

The latter view was put clearly by Peter Kirk: "We are unanimous — I hope — in a desire to save lives." "Today," Alfred Bertrand (CD/Bel), also urged, "let us stick to an appeal for mercy; if it fails we can come back to a political debate next month." But this call was undermined by his charge that the Socialists had no concern for Dubcek in

Czechoslovakia, which they angrily rejected. Tempers grew high, injudicious aspersions were cast. Lord St Oswald, in support of the Kirk-de la Malène amendment, provoked left-wing groans by asserting that reforms were being made in Spain and that terrorism anywhere was reprehensible. In an appeal for calm, Pierre Deschamps (CD/Bel) described the Spanish situation as "mad repression resulting in blind terrorism".

Christian de la Malène, arguing for non-interference, denounced "one-way condemnation, one-way indignation", and won a riposte from Mr Fellermaier: "We do not want to bring the Soviet Union or China into the Community; Spain we do. That is the difference". Fellow Socialist Ole Espersen (Dk) argued that the Community had interfered in Greece and that political conditions were better now.

Lord Castle (Soc/UK) regretted the absence of a unanimous view, appealing to Peter Kirk to support the Socialist resolution if only to save time. But it was not to be.

The Communist resolution was withdrawn, the Conservative amendment defeated, and the Socialist resolution was accepted both paragraph by paragraph and as a whole.

Regional fund disquiet

Is Britain "cheating" on the Regional Fund? "Having been in touch with all the regions in my country", John Corrie (Con/UK) noted when introducing a debate on the subject on Thursday, September 25, "I find a great deal of disquiet at the operation of the fund." Part of the trouble was that local authorities had to channel applications to the fund through the appropriate Government department — and Mr Corrie quoted a letter from the Grampian Regional Council complaining that their application was being treated "as part of the anti-inflation exercise".

More disturbingly, there was a suspicion that the Community money was being allocated, not *in addition* to existing national aid, but *instead* of it. But "the Regional Fund was not set up to act as Santa Claus to the sick economy of Member States. It was set up specifically to help the poorer

regions within those states... If any national governments cheat in the implementation of this Fund, it will have dire consequences for the whole Community. Those countries that pay in most funds will not stand back and watch national exchequers swallow their money."

Replying to the debate, Commissioner George Thomson pointed out that "additionality is more complex than it seems". Nevertheless, at the next meeting of the Regional Fund Committee each Member State would be making a report on how it viewed the matter. The question of direct links between Brussels and the regions was also complex. In an earlier reply to Tom Ellis (Soc/UK) at Question Time on Wednesday 24, Commissioner Thomson had already pointed out that "the Commission's formal legal relationships are only with the central governments of the Member States... I would warn Mr Ellis against falling into the trap of thinking that there is some sort of magic wand to be waved from Brussels."



Commissioner Thomson replies to Tom Ellis (Soc/UK) at Question Time

Though the British Conservatives on their own had some notable achievements in bringing Westminster to the European Parliament — including highly effective "whipping" by James Scott-Hopkins — they were inevitably like a man trying to clap with one hand when it came to capturing the authentic Commons flavour. Now the Labour MPs have arrived, and the effect has been impressive. Cheers and jeers were flying happily across the Chamber during the September session as the Labour Members — "this howling mob which has just joined us" according to Conservative leader Peter Kirk — led a successful Socialist opposition to Conservative Tom Normanton's report on competition policy. The Christian Democrat Group in the middle seemed a little bewildered — indeed most of them appeared to go home. But Socialist leader Ludwig Fellermaier (Ger) seemed delighted. "Adding a little temper to a debate," he retorted to Kirk, "is like adding salt to soup."

The Labour Members also seemed to have had a decisive effect on relative voting strength. Late at night or on thinly-attended Friday Mornings the Conservatives have sometimes had a majority over all others. This was already at an end during the July session; and twice in September — the Spanish debate (this page) and competition (see over) — the Labour Members gave the Socialist Group an overall majority of its own.

There are, of course, difficulties in reconciling nine parliamentary traditions. This was illustrated at Question Time on September 24, when Hugh Dykes (Con/UK), irritated that the President of the Council of Ministers had got through only two questions in half an hour (admittedly including supplementaries), asked Parliament President Spénale whether it was not his duty "to protect Parliament from 'university lectures' by the Minister?"

MPs also differ about the desirability of open committee meetings. The rules state that a committee shall meet in private unless it decides otherwise. Mrs Winifred Ewing (Ind/UK) wrote to President Spénale asking why this was so, especially as Parliament had criticised the Council of Ministers for meeting behind closed doors. The President's reply, in Mrs Ewing's view, was even less satisfactory: that in future a committee wanting to admit the press or public should first of all apply to the Parliament's Bureau.

While Labour Members' dissatisfaction at Parliament's oscillation between Luxembourg and Strasbourg remains fresh (longer-standing Members become resigned) the Socialists have prompted the Bureau to ask for a study of the problem by the Political Affairs Committee. As direct elections approach the matter becomes urgent. Unfortunately, the decision on a permanent home for the Community institutions rests on a unanimous decision of the nine governments.

"We are," began Socialist Hans Lautenschlager, "dealing with a matter of the highest importance: namely electronic data-processing." At this point the English translation was cut off, and Herr Lautenschlager's German mysteriously processed into French through British and Irish headphones. Fortunately, UK Conservative Tom Normanton's expostulations (in French) reached President Spénale satisfactorily by normal, unprocessed sound waves. The debate was adjourned for technical adjustments.

Mr Alfred Bertrand (Bel) has been elected to lead the Christian Democrat Group in the Parliament. He succeeds Hans-August Lückner (Ger); and was the runner-up in this year's election for the Parliament's Presidency.

SURPRISING REJECTION OF COMPETITION REPORT

It is almost unprecedented for a report adopted unanimously by a European Parliament committee to be voted down in plenary session. This, however, is what happened on Thursday, September 25, to the Economic and Monetary Committee's report on competition policy.

The document is a commentary on the Commission's own "Fourth Report on Competition Policy"; and the Parliamentary Committee, as rapporteur Tom Normanton (Con/UK) noted when introducing the debate, had spent "many long hours" on it. The Commission is urged, among other things, to "use its powers firmly and purposefully" to prevent the introduction of competition-distorting government subsidies, and to "align existing national aid arrangements with Community rules".

"When all are in receipt of aids, no-one is in receipt of aids," Tom Normanton pointed out. His report also noted that "the tendency to nationalise undertakings or branches of industry... could mean a distortion of conditions of competition".

The spokesman for the Socialist Group, Kristian Albertsen (Soc/Dk), promised support with reservations. So did the Christian Democrats and the European Progressive Democrats, whose spokesman, Albert Liogier (F), nevertheless warned against trying to "unify price-formation" (i.e., create a Community Prices and Incomes

Policy). But the apparent unanimity of assent disintegrated when Lord Bruce (Soc/UK), in his maiden speech, complained that the report made no mention of the "gross distortion of competition in the micro-economy by the multi-nationals". "I invite all Socialists to vote against this resolution!" he concluded.

Lord Gordon-Walker (Soc/UK), also in a maiden speech, was even more critical. The whole basis of the report was wrong. Competition was no longer the norm to be aimed at, since there had to be a considerable degree of public control and intervention. The most sweeping condemnation came from Willie Hamilton (Soc/UK) who believed that the Treaty of Rome itself was "becoming less and less relevant". Socialists were in the Parliament to replace the Community based on competition with one based on co-operation; "and I speak as a confirmed European".

With the British Labour Members having a majority within it, the Socialists switched to opposition; and the Liberals, Conservatives, EPD and Christian Democrats could not muster enough votes between them to get the report through.

Aid now, visits later

While Parliament frowned on developments in Spain, it smiled on developments in Portugal. Thursday's tough discussions on suspending trading arrangements with Spain were preceded on Wednesday by calls during an emergency debate for Community aid to be given quickly to help the ailing Portuguese economy. "Portugal is after all part of Europe," said Christian de la Malène (EPD/F); Parliament should "speak out across the Pyrenees, assuring the Portuguese people of our goodwill and anxiety to help," said Michael Stewart (Soc/UK). Peter Kirk (Con/UK) thought that the aid should be for specific Community-instigated projects and not general "watering-can" aid; but Schelto Patijn (Soc/NL) called for an end to the delay caused by Community experts spending hours discussing it.

A few days later, on September 29, Parliament's President Georges Spénale wrote to the President of the Portuguese constituent assembly inviting members of that assembly to visit the European Parliament during one of its next three sessions. President Spénale also suggested he meet the Portuguese Assembly President (Mr Henrique Teixeira Queiros de Barros) in Lisbon to arrange the visit.

Time alone will tell

Was the recent Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe a success or a failure? Both optimistic and cynical views were expressed during a debate on Wednesday, September 24, called by the Socialist Group. Lucien Radoux (Soc/Bel) thought that the Conference was "the greatest gamble over the future that Europe had ever made"; Michael Stewart (Soc/UK) however thought that Europe had "lost nothing diplomatically, militarily, territorially or in any material sense by going there". Lord Gadwyn (Lib/UK) wondered whether any Members had actually read all of the 30,000 word declaration. "It probably contains," he said, "the greatest number of impeccable principles governing international relations that has ever been pieced together in one document." If observed, the declaration should "clearly result in the accomplishment of that age-long dream of humanity — perpetual peace". The real question however was "what likelihood is there of such observance"?

Whose oil?

A general unease about energy policy in the Community was expressed when Silvio Leonardi (Comm/It) presented a report on hydrocarbon — oil and gas — policy. It was an unease that Commissioner Henri Simonet shared with Members. There were too many illusions abroad: that prices would flatten out (this three days before the latest OPEC price rise), for example, that new sources would solve the supply problem. The

Community could end up by doing nothing.

National interest indeed dominated the contributions from the British MPs. Tom Normanton (Con) denounced both the "tribalists" and the "dogma-ridden political fanatics" who wanted state control of oil resources, though adding by way of comfort to the former group: "There is not the slightest shred of evidence... that oil on the continental shelf is to be expropriated from those who have sovereignty over it." But Winifred Ewing (Ind) was not much comforted. Mr Leonardi, she said, referred to everyone enjoying the benefits of a Community energy policy. But who is going to enjoy the disadvantages of being in the place from where the oil comes?... "where cities are suddenly invaded by hordes of people for whom there are no houses or schools, so that the local communities cannot cope any longer with the situation."

John Osborn (Con) and Willie Hamilton (Soc) disagreed sharply over the extraction rate. The former argued that, given the expense of maintaining rigs and platforms in position, the cost of North Sea oil would be even higher if production was too long drawn out. Mr Hamilton's trenchantly expressed view was that "excessively rapid exploitation of these finite resources... could be detrimental to the British national interest and in the long term the European interest".

Slow steps to high-speed data

Very slowly, and under a sceptical gaze from several parts of the European Parliament, the Community seems to be getting a policy for computers. On Tuesday, September 23 a report proposed by Pierre-Bernard Cousté (EPD/F) was passed approving five priority projects — the first step, according to the Commission, in building "a viable European data-processing industry by the early 1980s".

No-one in the House criticised the projects themselves, which are, as Mr Cousté pointed out, "urgent necessities" in their own right. A central file is to be set up to determine organ and blood group compatibility; systems for dealing with information on trade and the working of the CAP are to be studied; and so are systems for codifying Community law; work is to be done on air-traffic control; and on computer-aided design techniques (CAD) in electronics and construction.

Criticism centred largely on the fear that the Commission was not aware what it was getting itself into. The Cousté report itself regretted "the lack of precision in the financial estimates on these projects", while Tom Normanton (Con/UK) confessed to "very deep misgivings about the Commission's fundamental thinking". Was the establishment of a "fully viable and competitive" data-processing industry by the early 1980s really on? "We should ask ourselves what will be the cost... and who will pay?" Each and every Member State had already poured out millions to the same

end., and with little effect. For Tom Lallyell (Soc/UK) it was "what the British called cloud-cuckoo land".

Commissioner Spinelli, however, thought the policy was progressing well. Indeed, he took the opportunity to announce a second series of projects: on "language in real time"; the confidentiality of data; documentation; and the transfer of data at high speed. The strategy was to encourage developments in new areas where it was easier to get into the market.

Belts and braces

It is not often that Commissioners are seen to attack the governments of their home states. On Friday after a whole week as the Commissioner "on duty" at Parliament, George Thomson's patience was perhaps growing thin. After the many exceptions to Community rules already allowed Britain in accession and renegotiation he was confronted on Friday morning with the job of having to excuse the Commission's reluctant support for allowing a further "exception" in the form of continued UK cereal subsidies — a relic of the British deficiency payment system. The continental system of agricultural intervention and support was a better guarantee than deficiency payments, he argued, adding "I hope that eventually the UK will learn that the continental belt is better than the English braces".

Plonk for all

"I have never been confronted with such a difficult situation" Commissioner Lardinois told Parliament during a debate on the "wine lake" and French government measures. It was "a shadow over the Community" and has cost him three quarters of his August leave. The Commission was trying hard to solve the problem with export refunds, phasing out monetary compensation amounts and other measures such as distillation; but the member states still failed to agree among themselves. Consumption of wine, he said, was being inhibited, in addition to the French tax — declared illegal by the Commission — by a large discrepancy in the rates of excise duties and VAT levied in different member states. Britain, Ireland and Denmark were the worst offenders with "astronomical heights of fiscal duties" which were "five to seven times higher than what the grower himself received for the wine."

Significantly both Socialist and Conservative British Members echoed his call for lower duties. "In Northern Europe," said Mr Lardinois, table wine "shouldn't cost more than a pint of milk". As for "plonk", he said "our workers in North Europe can derive pleasure from this wine". In a maiden speech Lord Walston (Soc/UK) agreed. He described it as "one of the greatest joys of life" and quoted a French proverb "a day without wine is a day without sun". It was "ridiculous" he said, that the excise duty was the same (in the UK) for a five year old bottle of Chateau Lafite as for table wine. He hinted, however, that if the French ended the practice of tax discrimination against whisky in favour of cognac "this would help us to solve the UK problem".

Isidor Früh (CD/Ger) also spoke up in favour of boosting wine consumption. "We aren't suggesting getting all your calories from alcohol," he said, but "why not a little wine with your lunch?" If everyone drank a bottle a day, the "wine lake" would be gone in a week.

Where did the money go?

Prices to the producer are going down; but prices to the consumer are going up. How does the Council of Ministers explain that? Heinz Frehsee (Soc/Ger) interjected at Question Time on Wednesday, September 24. He summed up neatly the complaints from both sides which developed from a question by Betty Boothroyd (Soc/UK). "Accepting that the farmer receives something between a quarter and a half of what the consumer pays," she asked, "is the Council paying attention to the other half which is absorbed in marketing, distribution and advertising?" "What does the Council think would be a reasonable margin of profit," added James Scott-Hopkins (Con/UK), "between the producer, the wholesaler and retailer?" It should be enough, President in Office of the Council Battaglia replied, to ensure re-investment; but he was unwilling to go further in "a complicated enough problem".