



European Conservative Group
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Extract from a speech by the Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Rippon,
QC, MP, (Hexham), at a Meeting of the Conservative Group
for Europe at St Stephen's Club, Westminster, on Wednesday
30 November 1977 at 8 p.m.

LABOUR COMMITTED BRITAIN

A curious fact of modern British political history is that all our international commitments to direct elections and greater powers for the European Parliament have been made by Labour Governments.

It was in the course of the state visit of the Italian President Saragat that a joint Anglo-Italian declaration was signed on April 28th, 1969, on behalf of the Labour Government, declaring that:

"The political development of Europe requires that all Members of an enlarged Community shall be able to play a full part. Europe must be firmly based on democratic institutions, and the European Communities should be sustained by an elected Parliament as provided for in the Treaty of Rome. The role of the present European assemblies must be enhanced."

The Conservative Government between 1970-74 went no further than saying we adhered to the "Saragat Declaration". We entered into no commitments about either the date of direct elections or the extension of powers of the European Parliament. It was the Labour Government that entered into new obligations.

The Labour Government it was who undertook in Paris in December 1974 that: "The competence of the European Assembly will be extended, in particular by granting it certain powers in the Communities' legislative process."

The Labour government it was who at the same time accepted that direct elections should be achieved as soon as possible.

The Labour Government it was who signed in Brussels the Decision and Act of 20th September 1976 providing that "the election of the Assembly should be held on a single date within the period May-June 1978". That Act was signed by the Foreign Secretary "For the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland".

The conclusion of treaties or other international agreements is an exercise of the Royal Prerogative in the conduct of foreign affairs. The Government must make up its mind whether it, as a government, assents to the international commitment into which it proposes to enter. If it does that, it is an exercise of collective responsibility in which the Government in substance always binds itself to those with whom it has entered into agreement to use its best endeavours to secure whatever parliamentary approval may be necessary.

The Government have manifestly failed to use their best endeavours to secure the necessary legislation in time.

But who among our allies could have imagined that any government would interpret a promise to use their best endeavours to get the approval of the House of Commons as permitting individual Ministers themselves to say that their own best endeavours to keep their own word have failed to the extent that they repudiate the very international commitments for which they are collectively responsible?

What is now to be done? The Government are still going slow and will seek to blame the Conservative Party for any delay that may result from a decision to prefer single-member constituencies to a method of proportional representation based on regional lists.

In fact the free vote they have promised on the method of election could have been held months ago - as indeed we urged. I believe the majority of Members of Parliament have been and will remain willing to accept the result of a free vote. Equally, if the decision is in favour of single-member constituencies, I think a shortened Boundary Commission procedure would be perfectly feasible and acceptable bearing in mind that there are no existing sitting members to be affected by boundary changes as is normally the case. Indeed Parliament itself could delimit the 81 constituencies in a Schedule to the Act. In any event, whatever the recommendations of the Boundary Commission, it is Parliament which finally determines the matter of boundaries.

Indeed readers of the recent extracts from the Crossman diaries will have been reminded of the gerrymandering done by the present Prime Minister, then Home Secretary, before the 1970 General Election. Moses would be welcome to produce his Tablets on this occasion! But perhaps this time he will be willing to accept - as he should have done in 1969 - the recommendations of the Boundary Commission, who would be perfectly capable of proposing combinations of existing constituencies on the basis of their existing knowledge.

ACTION ON THE GUILLOTINE

Then there is the question of the guillotine. If or when the Government propose a guillotine should they be supported by Conservatives? I recall that after the House of Commons had by a large majority supported our Accession to the European Community on the basis of the terms I negotiated, many pro-European Labour MPs took the view that it was the Government's responsibility to secure its own business and accordingly voted consistently against the provisions of the European Communities Act which merely ratified the terms of a Treaty which they approved. Happily a number of them were prepared to raise their heads sufficiently above the parapet to abstain from time to time on crucial votes so that we always had a majority, however small.

It does not lie in the mouths of Socialist Europeans to tell Conservatives to behave as patriots rather than partisans. When it came to the guillotine motion on May 2nd 1972 the Labour vote was virtually solid. Roy Jenkins, Harold Lever, and George Thomson all voted against. Yet nobody says that there are not good Europeans. Only four Labour back-benchers abstained. Their names deserve to be recalled because they were the only ones who never wavered throughout the long hard-fought battles through the night. They were Mr. Willie Hannan (Glasgow, Maryhill); Mr. George Lawson (Motherwell); Mr. Carol Johnston (Lewisham); and Mrs. Freda Corbet (Peckham). They were ready to forfeit their seats in Parliament for the European cause - and they did forfeit them. They are the Labour Europeans who really deserve the gold medals.

Nevertheless in spite of that precedent I hope that the Conservative Party will not be tempted to do as we have been done by. The Government has shown very little good faith so far but provided they finally and genuinely seek to honour

the word they gave on behalf of Britain I believe we should be ready to support a guillotine in accordance with our European principles and in defence of Britain's honour. To do otherwise would lend countenance to the discreditable behaviour of the Labour Government, further undermine the basis on which international agreements are reached, and call in question not only the good faith of the present but of all subsequent British Governments.

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