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POLITICAL UNION : THE EMERGING CONSENSUS

Extract from a speech by Sir Leon Brittan
at a dinner to celebrate the
Milton Keynes Chamber of Commerce 1991 Awards
for achievements in exporting.

Milton Keynes, 26 April 1991

Last December the Community Heads of Government launched two Inter-Governmental Conferences to agree on amendments to the Treaty of Rome.

The first is working on Economic and Monetary Union, and it has made good progress, although its work is of course not complete.

The second Conference concerns what has been called Political Union. The title gave rise to some anxieties in this country, where the phrase suggests a relationship of the kind exemplified by the Act of Union between England and Scotland, or indeed by the United Kingdom itself. I have sought, over the last few months, to calm such fears, explaining that the Conference was not working on some blueprint for a United States of Europe.

The Emerging Consensus

Earlier this month the Luxembourg Presidency circulated a first consolidated draft of possible Treaty amendments. It confirms my view of the likely scope of the changes being contemplated.

I am not saying, of course, that I go along with everything in the Presidency draft. I believe, for example, that it is crucial that we should retain the basic institutional balance which has served the Community so well. The latest draft suggests some sensible modifications in existing procedures, seeking in particular to develop the role of the European Parliament and streamline decision-making. And it balances these suggested changes by equally strenuous efforts to involve national Parliaments more closely and more effectively in the Community process.

As the draft is carried forward over the coming months, however, I hope that particular care will be taken to preserve the Commission as the motor at the heart of the Community, and an effective guarantee to the

smaller Member States that their interests will be taken fully into account. The Community has been a pole of attraction because of its dynamism. Precisely because it is not a Federation it needs at its centre a body that can give it momentum. That cannot be provided by 12 separate Member States. Their interests are bound to differ. Their task, together with the Parliament, is to decide whether proposals that are put forward are acceptable. But the momentum has to be provided by a body that is separate from the Member States. That body is the Commission.

The draft Treaty proposes some extension of Community powers and majority voting in such sectors as the environment, energy and areas of social policy - but only insofar as all Member States can agree such changes. The test, so far as I am concerned, is that such suggestions should be pragmatic, and driven by concerns of efficiency, not doctrine. The Member States need to be able to act together through the Community where this makes practical sense, and it may well do so in many of the areas being discussed. New Community powers of this kind will be balanced by the incorporation of the principle that the Community should only act if and insofar as common objectives can be best achieved at a European level: what has become known as the principle of subsidiarity. In many cases it may be preferable to leave action for national - or even local - decision. That principle will now be enshrined in the Treaty itself.

There are also proposals to develop the Community's foreign policy. Again, the current suggestions seem to me to be moderate and practical. No-one is suggesting a "common foreign policy" in the sense that the Community would take on exclusive powers. Rather, the suggestion is that Heads of Government should agree on areas of policy in which it makes sense to act in concert. The Council of Ministers might then take majority decisions over the implementation of policy that has already been agreed. This would be accompanied by a major development of the existing institutional machinery for the effective pursuit of our essential common interests.

On the defence side, the plan is to develop European cooperation through the Western European Union, at least in the first instance. The WEU is a useful bridge. In my view it should at a later stage be brought formally within the structures of the European Community itself. But those who do not share that opinion need have no fear. The plan is that the question should be left open for later review in the light of experience. In any case, there is no intention of weakening NATO, nor would the current proposals have that effect. Rather the opposite.

Next steps : The UK Approach

There is still a long way to go in discussing these Treaty changes. There will, no doubt, be alarms and excursions as we proceed. It already seems clear to me, however, that the emerging text bears witness to the value of Britain making a full and positive contribution to the talks. In the past the UK has sometimes tended to hang back, saving its energies for the last possible moment, when it has indignantly sought to reject compromises arrived at by others. That has not proved a successful strategy. It is far more effective to be there from the word go, contributing positively to the process, as Britain is now doing.

Some Concerns

The consensus which seems likely to emerge looks as if it will be balanced and moderate.

That is not to say, of course, that the British Government will like it all, any more indeed than I do.

I am particularly concerned, for example, that we should use the opportunity of this Conference to bring defence trade and production within the normal rules of the Community, to improve efficiency and competitiveness. I much regret that the Presidency have not so far picked up the Commission's proposal to delete Article 223 of the Treaty of Rome which has promoted national discrimination and unbridled state subsidy in the defence field. That has led to greater cost for taxpayers, and given our Armed Forces less good value for money than would otherwise have been the case.

And I am concerned that the concept of a "Political Union" should not be used to create something separate from the European Community proper. Some have suggested that the "Union" should include the Community but develop certain activities (such as foreign and security policy) outside the existing Community structures.

In my view that would be a retrograde step. It would reduce openness. It could create major problems in the future because we cannot rely, in the longer term, on the necessary level of unity within the European Council of Heads of Government. And, - because Heads of Government cannot hope to meet as a group more than a few times a year - it would place tremendous power in the hands of the Secretariat which will arrange their business and carry their work forward between meetings. It would create an unnecessary new bureaucracy. In short, in important new fields of activity the present proposals threaten to deny us the benefits of the Community process which has proved so successful where it has been applied.

Conclusion

This Conference is by no means all over bar the shouting. There is still a lot to be fought for. But I believe the talks are on course for a conclusion later this year which will amount to a pragmatic advance rather than an ideological ambush.