

"THE EUROPEAN IDEAL IN THE LIGHT OF DIRECT ELECTIONS"

Speech by Richard Burke, Member of the  
Commission of the European Communities, to the  
European Democratic Forum on Thursday 29/9/1977.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have called my speech tonight "The European Ideal in the Light of Direct Elections" for two reasons. First, because I believe those elections will afford us the best opportunity we are likely to get in the short term to further the European ideal. Second, because the imminence of Direct Elections, and the great debate on Europe which they will promote, requires us to look again at the ideal and see how it stands. We have to ask ourselves, I suggest: What is it precisely, now, that we are working towards? And how will Direct Elections assist us?

There was a time, in the early days of the Community, when that first question would hardly need to have been put. We know very well what the founding fathers wanted. They were as forthright as they were bold. Their objective was aptly stated in the title of Jean Monnet's "Action Committee for the United States of Europe."

All, or nearly all, of those who took the "European" side in the debates of the 50s and the early 60s saw it as self-evident that a European federation was both desirable and attainable. There was a coherence and a clear-headedness about their aims and their means which we certainly cannot match.

Moreover their programme had great popular appeal. I remember how in my own country, still many years away from accession to the Community, the words and deeds of men like Monnet, Hallstein and Ray evoked in our minds the hope of a revolutionary and humane political system, in which we urgently wanted to participate. We thought we were glimpsing the future.

I do not intend to trace the events which altered that happy perspective. In any case, there will be many different versions of what went wrong, of where momentum and clarity were lost.

What matters for our purposes is that they have been lost, some time ago. The United States of Europe is still a dream cherished by many, but its attainment is no longer a matter of practical political effort in the Community institutions. The grand design of the founding fathers, the strategy for the creation in stages of a European federation, has effectively been set aside. No alternative strategy has taken its place.

At the same time the continuing discussion of Europe's future at the bar of public opinion has become marked by ambiguity and uncertainty. Even the "good Europeans" disagree on the means they should use, and, frequently, on the ends they seek. So the European ideal has become something that is debated rather than affirmed.

The authoritative restatement of that ideal for our day might, ideally, lead to the adoption of a new strategy for union. I am not, however, going to try to offer such a blueprint here. Indeed I think there may for the moment be merit in avoiding grand designs, and choosing instead to take short steps along such paths as are open. And for reasons to which I will shortly return, I think it would be wise to postpone the strategic debate until after the directly-elected Parliament has come into being.

But here I have to confess to the uneasy feeling that the original ~~design~~<sup>Strategy</sup>, while no longer a subject for practical implementation, retains an influence that may not be quite healthy. I sense that for many people it has become a kind of pious object. That is, it is regarded in a spirit of devotion rather than of critical enquiry. It is too often seen as a noble and all but perfect project which went unrealized only because of the inadequacy of the men and governments called to serve it.

To the extent that this view has influence I think it does a disservice, both to ourselves and to those "Europeans of the first hour", as Ralf Dahrendorf once called them, who shaped the original design. They were indeed visionaries, but eminently practical ones - they devised a tough and ambitious programme, which was essentially a political programme. It partially succeeded, and it partially failed.

I suggest we may usefully ask: to what extent did the founders' strategy contain the seeds of its partial failure? If we find significant inherent flaws, can we learn from them?

To ask these questions is not in any sense to disparage the achievement of a very remarkable group of men to whom, as I believe, Europe is and will be vastly indebted. But they themselves would have been the first to insist that no set of ideas should be immune from scrutiny, particularly if they have not altogether worked in practice.

It is in this spirit of respectful enquiry that I would like to isolate two elements in the thinking of the founders. One is a point of principle which underlay their whole enterprise, the other a point of tactics. I want to suggest that both of these were flawed in serious ways, and may have worked against the achievement of European Union.

The first is an idea perhaps more identified than any other with the federalist cause - namely the idea that nationalism is a malign force that has to be overcome. It seems to me, looking back to the early years of the Community, that the polemical assault launched then against nationalism was a great mistake, and that the detestation of the Nation State which inspired the polemic sometimes bordered on the irrational.

A horror of nationalism in the men of that generation is certainly understandable to some degree. No one could doubt that it was an extreme perversion of nationalism which plunged Europe into the disaster of World War II. And, after all, the central motive in launching the Community and its predecessors was to render it impossible, or next to impossible, for the European states to make war on one another again.

But it was, I suggest, a mistake to judge nationalism only by its worst excesses, and also a mistake to suppose it might readily be overcome.

For whether we like it or not, nationalism is still one of the primary forces which move men politically. Of course, when we are thinking well of it, we call it "patriotism." Whatever term we use we have to accept that it is a sentiment almost endemic in political man.

This was not always so, and doubtless it will not always be so. But in the present phase of our history it is, for great parts of the world community, a sentiment as firmly lodged in human nature as the acquisitive instinct or the instinct of self-defense. That is, it is a property of human character before which it is futile to moralize. The best that can be done, in the moral way, is to find means to discipline an appetite that can be dangerous if unchecked. But the appetite cannot be eradicated. Men might be gentler and better in every way if the acquisitive instinct were plucked from them, but they would not be men as we know them.

Similarly, a Community purged of its nationalism might be more peaceful and benign, but it would be unlike any community we have known in Europe for a few centuries, and its sudden emergence at this juncture strikes me as unlikely in the extreme. One does not have to be Irish to understand this, but, unluckily for us, it helps.

Indeed, so far from being the twilight of nationalism - as some have argued - the present age could better be called its high noon. At least, in the week when the General Assembly meets in New York this strikes me as the truer picture. If one looks around the world one cannot doubt that this is, as much as the late nineteenth century was for Europe, an "age of nationalism."

~~But~~, I am happy to concede that in Europe itself we do appear to have reached the afternoon. But in Europe still most of us think of ourselves first as Frenchman, Germans, Irishmen. There is, as yet, no primary European identity that can match the power of the traditional loyalties. There is, however, a secondary line of loyalty - to Europe, to the Community, which is now I think well established, and which we must hope will steadily grow stronger.

But the process must not be forced by any simplistic assault on nationalism, or any undue complaint about the "selfish" or "unenlightened" behaviour of nation states. The point, I believe, is a moral one, and it has to do with democracy.

As long as most people in most of our countries think of themselves and respond to events in terms of loyalty to their nation State, then we have no right, as advocates of European Union, to abuse their beliefs. And, also, at the level of intellectual exchange it is wrong to present nationalism as a disreputable idea, and to attach all virtue to the doctrines of supra-nationalism.

Not only wrong, I think, but foolish. For the chief effect of the extreme federalist arguments of the 50s and 60s was surely to mobilise the defenders of the nation-state, who proceeded to demonstrate - at some cost to the Community - just how resilient they still were.

William Butler Yeats used to say: "I am a nationalist - in Ireland, and for passing reasons." The reasons which sustained nationalism are slowly passing, as I see it. But we must avoid the temptation of premature burial.

I have spoken at some length of an idea - I would almost call it a prejudice - which has done some damage, and may still linger. I want now to mention another aspect of the early design for European unity which troubles me, and this will lead me to a consideration of Direct Elections.



The thing that worries me has been called the neo-functional strategy for Union.

This strategy, I think, can be summarised as follows: The central authority, in practice the Commission, would accumulate power in carefully-planned stages. First it would make itself responsible for technical matters which of their nature overlapped national boundaries. It would concentrate on those areas which governments would normally leave to experts, where the political content was slight.

But, by degrees the central authority would extend its control, edging its way towards the heights of economic and finally political power.

Then, at a certain stage it would be borne in upon national governments that the balance of power had passed from them to the new centre, and a real European union would begin to materialize.

I am necessarily simplifying the neo-functional argument, but I hope I have conveyed its essence. I mention it because a strategy along these lines was cherished by some of the Community founders. It was a bold and astute plan; it was also, I suggest, a singularly unfortunate one - and we cannot regret its failure.

For was there not something undemocratic in the whole conception? Was it not, for example, determinist in a way which curiously parallels the Marxist formula for the withering away of the state? Was it not materialist in its assumption that as the authority made itself increasingly responsible for the working conditions, incomes, social welfare, food and medicine of the European population, so it would automatically engage their affection and loyalty?

And was the scheme not also elitist in the sense that all this was the work of a small group - admittedly charged with the highest idealism - which would operate without direct democratic mandate and in many ways against the interests of national governments which had such a mandate?

I cannot but feel that there was in this strategy an attempt to smuggle into existence a supranational state without the full consent of the European people.

It may be argued that a good deed done by stealth is still a good deed. In this case, I doubt it. It strikes me that if a federation had emerged in this way it would not have survived very long, because explosions of thwarted nationalist feeling would have torn apart a structure not yet stabilized by profound popular loyalty.

That question is academic. What is not academic, I think, is the primacy we must accord to the democratic process in the construction of Europe. Once we get even one step away from that - from the business of people making marks on papers and putting them in the ballot box - we are in trouble. It was a great misfortune of the founding fathers - and of course no fault of theirs - that their efforts lacked democratic support and scrutiny. The supreme importance of the Direct Elections to the European Parliament is that they restore the people to the central role they should always have.

What their ballot papers will say I do not know, and it is their privilege to keep us waiting. That is another reason why, to return to an earlier point, I think it is right now to forego grand strategies for the future of the Community.

When the votes are in, and the newly mandated parliamentarians have had time to look around, then will perhaps be the time to seek another grand design.

What will these parliamentarians bring with them? I suggest that, before they have even said a word, they will have done several important things, by the mere fact of being elected.

They will have strengthened the legitimacy of all the European institutions.

They will, through the electoral process, have shown us something like the true shape of European public opinion about Europe. Such a direct consultation of the people has never taken place before. For the first time we shall have, as it were, an uninterrupted view of popular feeling on the questions which preoccupy us: What is the strength of federalist support - and of nationalist? Who are the regionalists, who the centr<sup>al</sup>ists?

But perhaps the best thing the parliamentarians will have to offer is that they will be seen as leading a special kind of mass movement. I don't of course mean a movement going in a single direction at a single pace, since the elected representatives will belong to a variety of rival political families. But they will have in common an involvement in European questions at a European level. I believe this mass involvement of electors will lead gradually towards the formation of a true European identity.

Whether in its institutional relationships this new parliament will be a friend or foe of the Commission, I cannot predict. Naturally, as the Commissioner responsible for relations with Parliament, I would prefer it were our friend. But again, it will be for the Parliament to choose or reject alliances.

The Commission's role will continue. It will remain the proponent of new policies, and the defender of the Treaties. But it will await the Direct Elections more keenly, more hopefully, I believe, than any other event of its term.

I have tried tonight to argue the inadequacy of the neo-functional approach, and the still more obvious inadequacy of the nationalist position. I have deliberately not offered any strategic design for the advance of the Community. But it is right that you should expect me to say what is the finished European construction I hope one day to see.

This is easily done. I re-affirm the original faith of the founders, of Adenauer, de Gasperi, Schumann, Monet. That is, I am an unrepentant federalist.

I can see no other goal worth struggling for. And I see an irresistible logic which will prevail, however long it takes or whatever setbacks face us now. Europe has perhaps

already made the historic step forward, in recognising that, as the triumphs and temptations of global power receded, so it became inconceivable that western European States should ever make war on one another again.

That perception is enhanced by the economic inter-dependence of the member states which has long been self-evident. The economic links which bind us are much stronger than the links of any member state with a third country. Of course there are painful disparities of economic performance within the Community. Of course a conscious re-distribution of resources is necessary, and will indeed be a major pre-condition of the progress we seek.

But when we feel discouraged, let us recall that the Community is already one of the most significant economic entities in the world. It has the strength to go forward: what it lacks are the will and the instruments.

Economic convergence has reinforced the sense of a common European heritage - spiritual, cultural and political. This can be at least as powerful as any economic factor. And I would say that the most precious element in that heritage is the democratic order.

So, being European federalists, we must also be democrats. And if I were pressed to state a priority I would have to say "democrats first."

I hope and believe that the democratic choice will in the end be for federalism. If I am wrong I still insist that the only Europe worth having, whatever its character, will be democratically chosen. With Direct Elections we make the first decisive step for many years towards that choice. And when exhaustive blueprints are demanded I think of the words of Jean Monnet:

"No one today can predict the form that Europe will take tomorrow, because no one can foresee the changes that will be born of change itself."

Parliament. Every socialist party on the continent looks forward to fighting those elections next summer. For us - as for you - socialism and democracy have always been different sides of the same coin; and every continental socialist party without exception sees direct elections to the European Parliament as an indispensable step towards the democratisation of the Community.

But the achievement of direct elections now depends on you - on the British Labour Government and the British Labour Movement. It is not for me to say how this conference should vote on this matter this week, or how Labour Members of Parliament should vote when it comes before the House of Commons. But I do beg you to remember that if Britain decides against direct elections, she decides against them not just for herself, but for the whole Community. And such a decision would be a terrible blow to every democratic socialist party on the other side of the Channel.