

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND DIRECT ELECTIONS

Address by Mr Richard Burke to the Association
of Advertisers in Ireland

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Next June the European Parliament will become a directly-elected Parliament for the first time in its existence. This will be a significant moment in the history of the Community; indeed to my mind it will be the most important political event for Europe since the Enlargement of the Community in 1973. As for the institutional ramifications of this election, they probably surpass in importance anything that has happened since 1958.

The European Community exists to defend and cherish democracy. It is basic to the whole conception of the Community that political life is governed by the democratic process, and the Community's strength in the world arises to a great extent from its image as a custodian of democracy. If the Community were not democratic it could not exist, and the outside world understands very well this part of the Community's essence. It is for example no accident that Greece, Spain and Portugal have chosen this moment to negotiate their membership of the E.E.C. What qualifies them to apply, and what compels us to welcome them, is their new-found democratic character. For the Greece of the Colonels or the Spain of General Franco membership would have been unthinkable; but for the Greece or Spain of today it is undeniable.

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Despite all this there has however been a basic flaw in the composition of the Community since its beginning. Despite the fact that it is founded on the democratic order, and seen around the world as precisely and specifically a democratic experiment, it has not allowed for the voice of the people in its own particular institutions. It is a Community of democratic states, but at the Community level democracy has not contributed directly. The Council of Ministers is composed of individuals who are answerable to specific national electorates, but the Council as an institution has no direct democratic sanction. The Commission - to which I belong - has an even greater immunity from ordinary democratic procedures, since its members, once nominated by Governments - and let us remember that these nominations are entirely in the gift of governments, and do not require ratification by national Parliaments - this Commission once chosen by the member governments is effectively secure from democratic change for the four years of its existence.

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(It is true that the European Parliament has the power to dismiss the Commission, but true also that it has never come close to exercising that power, for reasons which I would like to discuss later).

Finally the third political institution of the Community, the Parliament itself, has until now enjoyed only an indirect democratic mandate. That is, it is composed of individuals who have been elected to nine separate national Parliaments but not at all to the European Parliament. Rather they have been chosen by the national parliaments to go to Luxembourg and Strasbourg, and so in their European functions have not been directly answerable to the people who returned them to the national parliaments.

We are left then with the paradox that a Community founded to preserve and develop the democratic system has lacked in its own working mechanism, any component of direct democracy. Rather the democratic character of the Community has been ensured by a series of national arrangements which have had no counterpart at the European level. This indirect or even distorted version of democracy has, I believe, been damaging to the Community. It has retarded its growth in the area where growth is most important - namely in the attitudes of European citizens.

We now at last have the opportunity to correct that distortion by means of the Direct Elections. What we have had until now has been essentially a Europe of states. The nine governments have agreed on the steps to be taken towards European integration, or on many occasions have agreed to differ. The choices they have made in this area have profoundly affected the lives of the people they govern, but it is probably true to say that the European policies of the nine governments are rarely if ever an issue in national election campaigns. The questions uppermost in voters minds are still domestic or national questions; the European issues are also there, but in the background. The Direct Elections to the European Parliament will present voters, for the first time in the more than twenty years of the Community's existence, with the opportunity to evaluate and choose between different versions of the Community's future, and different policy proposals which relate to European rather than national perspectives. So the voter will for the first time be participating directly in the reality, or an important facet of the reality, of modern Community life. He or she will be having a say in the determination of policies at the European level as distinct from the purely national one. Since so much of our policy now is European policy - and I need mention here only the EMS - the voter will be participating in a debate and in a process of decision which transcends the national frontiers, and indeed renders those frontiers weaker than they used to be.

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But, it may be said, the Parliament to which the 410 newly elected members will go forward next June, is a feeble body scarcely worthy of the name "Parliament." I disagree very strongly with this view which is based on a very widespread misunderstanding of the powers of most Parliaments in the present day.

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The European Parliament is an advisory body. When the Commission makes proposals for Community legislation the adoption of which would result in Member States having to change their domestic legislation, the Council must seek the Parliament's opinion on the measures proposed. On the face of it, this restricts the European Parliament to a very much narrower role than is the case with national Parliaments. It does not have the traditional legislative role proper to a Parliament. Nevertheless, its opinions can be very influential in shaping Community policies.

I say this on the basis of my experience not only as the Member of the Commission responsible for relations between the Commission and the European Parliament, but also as the initiator of many policy proposals which have had to be debated in the Parliament. If the Parliament supports or rejects a Commission proposal by a substantial majority, then the Commission is accordingly encouraged or forced to rethink. The expected attitude of the European Parliament is frequently an important factor in policy debates in the Commission. In addition, the necessity of consulting the Parliament can be an important factor in determining our working timetable.

Neither the Commission nor the Council is obliged to follow the European Parliament's advice. In practice, however, we usually find that we modify at least some aspects of our proposals in order to take account of Parliament's expressed opinion.

The Commission, in keeping with its power of initiative, has the right to modify any of its proposals up to the moment when the Council makes a decision. This gives us the institutional means of taking account of Parliament's opinion.

Debates in the European Parliament are often very detailed, with members showing a considerable knowledge of the wide range of matters under discussion. Very frequently, members display a very considerable technical expertise.

When, after a detailed debate, the Parliament suggests an amendment to a proposal, it would be politically unwise of the Commission to ignore this suggestion.

The European Parliament has important power in relation to the budget. Indeed, we are now in the middle of a very difficult situation arising from the Parliament's exercise of its powers in relation to the Community's 1979 budget.

In fact, Parliament has quite an important say in relation to what we call "non-obligatory expenditure" and has the right, under the Treaty, to modify the overall budget within certain limits. Indeed the Parliament can have the final say in raising or lowering by a proportion which varies from year to year expenditure on particular items in the non-obligatory part of the budget. Those items include the Regional and Social Funds.

One should not exaggerate this power. After all something like 80% of each budget goes on obligatory expenditure, where the Parliament has no final say. On the other hand the right to alter figures, even in a restricted way and on a limited part of the budget is something which few national Parliaments now enjoy in practice, whatever the theory may be. Moreover it is very likely that the non-obligatory section of the budget will grow vigorously in the next few years. If we are to have a Community budget which will really achieve the resource transfers from the wealthy centre to the weaker periphery, which are now so widely demanded, it will have to be a budget where the Regional and Social Funds are very much larger than at present, if indeed there is not a new fund which would also take its place in the non-obligatory side. Therefore the present limited but real budgetary power of the Parliament is likely to grow quite significantly in the next few years.

All of this means that the Parliament is very much a force to be reckoned with in the adoption of the Community budget. Since budgetary matters are as important as they are, this gives the Parliament a substantial place among the Community institutions.

The Parliament has the power to fire the Commission. Fortunately for the Commission, the Parliament must fire all thirteen Commissioners or none at all. There have been a number of occasions when the Parliament has instituted impeachment proceedings against the Commission. For a variety of reasons, however, it has never gone through with it. This unexercised power is a stick with which the Parliament can from time to time threaten the Commission.

Direct elections will make no difference to these powers in legal terms.

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I am convinced, however, that the very fact of being directly elected will increase the Parliament's moral powers and will oblige the other Community institutions and people of the Member States to pay more attention to it.

I expect that the sensitivity of both the Commission and the Council to the Parliament's opinions will increase. The Parliament itself is already becoming more demanding with the prospect of direct elections just around the corner.

I would also expect that directly elected members of the European Parliament will probably have an even more confident and aggressive approach to their work than the present members.

I think it reasonable also to expect that a directly elected Parliament will be even more exacting than the present Parliament in the use of its budgetary powers.

The direct elections campaign will soon start. What will be the issues in this campaign? This depends very largely on the political parties which are now building up their platforms for this campaign. In particular, it depends on the parties' judgement of the sensitivity of the electorate to the various European policies.

I would like to see certain issues coming into prominence during this campaign, issues which intimately affect the people who will be voting.

Regional policy is one of these issues. Direct elections will give people in the disadvantaged regions a direct means of making their voice heard in the Community institutions.

I would hope that consumer policy will be another of the prominent issues in this campaign. The Community is criticized very often as being a capitalists' club or an industrialists' playground. This is not what we wanted to be : I believe that this view is shared by the majority of our people. I would hope that they will take this opportunity of expressing themselves on the day-to-day economic issues which affect them and what they, as consumers, expect the Community to do for them - and, if this is their view - to express clearly what they consider the Community has failed to do for them.

How can voters make their concerns known during this campaign ? They must use the means which they use during national and local elections, but they must take account of the fact that the constituencies will simply be bigger. This means using the existing structure of political parties and interest-groups to the maximum possible extent.

Those who present themselves as candidates for election must, for their part, ensure that they remain open to the expression of popular feeling about these issues, and resist the temptation which so often appears at Community level to regard these matters as if they were simply subjects for inter-governmental discussion.

The candidates ought to be people who while being firmly grounded in local issues and loyalties are also capable of judging matters in the perspective of the Community as a whole. It would be unfortunate if the direct elections returned only a collection of national or sectoral lobbyists. Clearly each member will be in a sense a lobbyist for his electorate or his region - not to speak of his party. But it would be a pity if members were not also ready to judge European issues on their general and objective merits. I am sure that the directly-elected Parliament will achieve this appropriate balance between the local and the European perspective, as indeed the present Parliament already does.

I would like now to say a few words about the salaries which the Parliamentarians will receive. There is no question related to the direct elections which generates more heat than this matter of salaries, and I am not sure that the recent decision of the European Council in Brussels has resolved the problem to everybody's satisfaction. It is probably true of course that no universally acceptable solution can be found. But the approach adopted by the Heads of Government seems to me particularly questionable.

The disparity which will exist between the salaries paid to British and Irish members, on the one hand, and those received by most of their continental colleagues on the other will, on present indications, be so wide as to create two distinct classes of members in the same institution. I cannot think that this will be a healthy development for the Parliament.

It may certainly be argued that members whose home and political bases are in Ireland or Britain can get by with a good deal less than their counterparts who come from France or Germany. It should nevertheless be remembered that the new Parliamentarians, if they are to do their job properly, will be expected to spend a great deal of time in Luxembourg, Strasbourg and Brussels. Indeed given the anticipated expansion of the Parliament's working schedule it will probably not be unusual for a conscientious member to be attending Parliament, either in plenary, committee, or political group sessions, for more than half of his working time. I have no doubt that such a member if in receipt only of an Irish or British Parliamentary salary, and of properly regulated expenses, will tend to be in financial terms a second class citizen by comparison with his colleagues, and may even have to contend with a certain degree of hardship.

There is a further point to make about this, namely that a number of the most talented prospective candidates, in this country and elsewhere, who have been looking forward to the Direct Elections, and who would have much to contribute to the new Parliament, may now be discouraged. This is not to say they are mercenaries or profiteers, but rather that they have had a reasonable expectation of receiving an adequate reward for what will certainly be a very testing job. I think such prospective candidates could not be blamed if they were to say that the figures which emerged from the recent discussions in Brussels do not constitute an adequate reward.

We must hope that the right solution can be found to this very difficult problem, and that at any rate the new Parliament will not be handicapped at birth. For if the Parliament gets the start it deserves, and if the European electors show their commitment by voting in large numbers, I believe we shall see the emergence of a powerful new political force capable in time of deepening and strengthening the Community and transforming the central institutions.

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The breath of air - perhaps I should rather say the blast of air - which the new Parliament will bring to the Council, the Commission, and the other Community bodies may not always be comfortable but I have no doubt it will be good for us, and good for the Community as a whole. The Europe which we have known for more than 20 years, that is the Europe of states, of specialists and economists and high civil servants, of experts on food prices, tachographs, and nuclear energy, the Europe which has been dynamic but also profoundly bureaucratic can only profit from the scrutiny, the criticism and the demands made by a directly-elected Parliament strong in its mandate and insistent on its rights.