

Speech by Christopher Tugendhat, EEC Commissioner responsible for the Budget, at the European Briefing Conference of the Conservative and Unionist Central Office, at 11.45 a.m. on Saturday, 1st July 1978, in Burford Bridge Hotel, Dorking.

The introduction of Direct Elections to the European Parliament, now scheduled to be held for the first time in June next year, should make it possible significantly to extend the influence of the peoples of the Member States in the Community's decision making. And if such an extension does indeed take place, the Community will, I believe, be able to enter a new much more dynamic phase of development based upon the foundation of much more complete/^{public} trust than at present in all its institutions and policies.

But it is very important not to imagine that there is some inexorable historical or sociological law which guarantees that once they are directly elected, European MPs will have a substantial influence upon Community legislation. The formal powers of the European Parliament are, in comparison with those of most of the Community's national Parliaments, very limited. Unless, therefore, the new Parliament conducts itself with considerable skill and wisdom, it is perfectly possible that it will make very little impact.

In my view, a failure by the directly elected Parliament to realise the high hopes that many have invested in it could have a very damaging effect upon public attitudes towards the Community. I would like today therefore to talk about the manner in which both the Parliament, and also the body of which I am a Member, the European Commission, must behave if the Parliament's effectiveness is to be maximised.

Avoiding national analogies

The 410 members of the new Parliament will include people from many different national backgrounds and constitutional traditions, very few of whom will have experience of the Community's institutions. In these circumstances it will be very difficult for Euro-MPs to identify and apply the approach most likely to yield the best results.

One inevitable and immensely dangerous temptation for the newly elected MEPs will be to set their sights upon acquiring powers in relation to the Community's other institutions anal of the powers enjoyed by national Parliaments in relation to national governments. Such a course would be entirely inappropriate and, almost certainly, extremely damaging to the Parliament's prospects of increasing its influence.

It would be inappropriate because all the institutions of the Community, including the Parliament, are quite different, both in form and function, from those of the Community's national governments. And it would be damaging to the Parliament's prospects because it would be bound to lead to a major constitutional collision with the Council of Ministers in which, the Parliament would be bound to sustain by far the severest injuries.

The American Congress

To warn of the dangers of relying too heavily on the analogies offered by their own national Parliaments is not of course to say the MEPs should not try to learn from the constitutional experience of others. One of the features which will distinguish the directly elected Parliament from most of its national counterparts within the Community is its lack of the power to form governments.

This is a characteristic which it will share, however, with the American Congress; and in my view the Parliament would be well advised closely to examine how Congress has acquired its very formidable position within the American political system. For although it is true that Congress enjoys legislative powers that the directly elected Parliament will lack, another major source of its influence has been the use of its committee system systematically and relentlessly to demand from the executives detailed explanations and justifications - very often in public session - of every aspect of federal policy.

There can be no doubt whatever that the knowledge that they will have to explain and defend their actions before Congressional Committees has a very substantial and salutary effect upon the actions of American Governments. And I am convinced that if the European Parliament follows Congress' example and concentrates its energies primarily upon ensuring that the Council of Ministers and the European Commission have to provide the fullest possible justification for their behaviour before both its specialist committees and its meetings in plenary session, then it will be able to wield much greater influence than its limited legal powers might suggest is likely.

As you will know, the Council of Ministers (represented by the Presidency) and the Commission already appear before Parliament. But because nominated MEPs also have burdensome duties in their own national Parliaments, they simply do not have the time - not least the time for preparatory research - to make the most of the opportunities which such appearances ought to offer for eliciting information by means of searching and persistent questioning. One of the main advantages of direct elections is that most directly elected MEPs will not be members of national Parliaments and will not, therefore, be similarly constrained.

Another feature of the present Parliament which somewhat blunts its effectiveness is its habit of holding most of its committee meetings in private. I believe that the directly elected Parliament should expose its committee sessions much more often than its predecessor to the public gaze; for in the nature of things the wider the audience the more anxious will be those who have to appear before the committees adequately to account for their actions. / It has sometimes been argued that unless Parliament's committees meet in private the Commission and the Council will become much less willing than at present to speak to MEPs frankly. I accept that there may be a very few areas of policy where this is true, and therefore I am not arguing that all committee meetings should be open. But generally speaking, Ministers and Commissioners are surely likely to find it less, not more, easy to justify a refusal to disclose information if that refusal is likely to be widely known.

The need for Parliament to speak with a coherent voice

The efficacy of the approach I am recommending will be severely impaired, however, if directly elected MPs fail to recognise another essential precondition of the successful exercise of influence by a body armed with only limited legal sanctions - namely, the possession of a coherent collective voice. The need to justify themselves before Parliament is not likely to weigh heavily upon Ministers or Commissioners, nor to modify their policies, if the Parliament is known to be riven by a welter of conflicting factional or national viewpoints - not least because in that event Parliament is likely to enjoy very little respect with the European public which it is supposed to represent. Obviously, the European Parliament cannot and should not aspire to achieve unanimity on every issue - if it did it would be a very dull place indeed - but it will only make a substantial ^{clear} impact if a/majority of its members are identified with a well-defined and consistent view of how the Community should develop and of the policies which it should pursue.

A change which would greatly facilitate, though it would not guarantee, the emergence of such a majority would be a reduction in the number of political groups at present sitting separately from each other in the European Parliament and the emergence of a better organised party system.

This is something which should especially concern Conservatives. For while the different national Socialist parties in the European Parliament, including the British Labour Party, have succeeded in merging themselves into a single, if sometimes rather undisciplined, political entity, the parties of the Centre Right are still split between three separate groups: the European People's Party, comprising the Community's main Christian Democratic Parties; the European Progressive Democrats, comprising the Gaullists and Ireland's Fianna Fail Party; and the European Conservative Party, an alliance of British and Danish Conservatives. This lack of unity has unquestionably substantially weakened the capacity of the Centre Right parties in the European Parliament to resist the influence of the Socialists. I therefore very much welcome the recent creation of the European Democratic Union, an organisation bringing together a number of Centre Right parties inside the Community - including the German Christian Democrats, the Gaullists and the British Conservatives - with a number of smaller parties outside - including the Swedish and Norwegian Conservatives and the Austrian Peoples' Party. The EDU provides the framework within which we can, and must, establish the much closer links upon which the defence of our common values depends.

Relations between Parliament and the Commission.

One vital determinant of the success or failure of the Parliament will be the nature of its relationship with the European Commission. The Founding Fathers of the Community assumed that over a period of time the European Commission would emerge as the most powerful of the Community's institutions. They therefore supposed that checking and influencing the Commission would be the Parliament's main task; and to help it to fulfil that task they gave the Parliament what is by far the most important of its formal legal powers - its right to / ^{dismiss} the entire Commission by means of a motion of censure supported by a two-third majority of those voting.

In the event, however, the institutions of the Community have evolved in a manner very different from that which the Founding Fathers envisaged. Most notably, the Council of Ministers has acquired an unexpected and decisive superiority over the other institutions which, for better or worse, it seems unlikely to lose in the foreseeable future.

Naturally and inevitably Ministers in Council tend to think primarily in terms of their respective national responsibilities. The Commission's role on the other hand is to expound and defend the Community interest. And if experience of the existing European Parliament is a guide it seems likely that its directly elected successor will also think mainly in supra-national terms.

Assuming that this is so, both the Parliament and the Commission will have a substantial interest in forming a close and constructive working relationship with each other in order to maximise the pressure that they can bring to bear upon the Council. But if they are to succeed in working together as partners it will be necessary for each to act appropriately towards the other.

On their side, the directly elected MEPs will obviously have to take great care to avoid seeking confrontation with the Commission merely for its own sake.

Meanwhile, for its part, the Commission will have to make every effort to demonstrate that it holds the Parliament in high respect. The Commission takes the existing Parliament very seriously and relations between the two bodies are generally speaking, very satisfactory. But it would be a mistake for the Commission to assume that it can take the good will of the directly elected Parliament for granted. In that context, I would like briefly to mention a possible modification to the Commission's structure which has sometimes been suggested as a necessary accompaniment to the Community's enlargement to include Greece, Spain and Portugal, but which, in my view, might have harmful repercussions upon the Commission's relations with the Parliament. I refer to the proposal that the larger Member States should in the future provide only one, and not as at present, two Commission Members.

The reasoning behind this proposal is that if the principle of two Commissioners from the larger Member States is maintained, the present Commission of 13 Members will have, on the accession of the applicant countries, to be increased to 17, (1 each for Greece and Portugal and 2 for Spain) and that an increase of this order will reduce the Commission's efficiency.

What is forgotten, however, is that even if the European Commission is never entrusted with new tasks - which seems unlikely - the duties it already has will, in an enlarged Community, become very much more complex and demanding. This will place greater burdens upon individual Commissioners in their area of responsibility and also upon the Commission collectively.

Moreover, there will also be an increase in the geographical area over which Commissioners in the course of their duties are obliged to travel. Yet travelling in a Community of nine countries already stretches to the limit the resources of thirteen Commissioners.

My fear is that if the Commission's numbers are restricted at a time when the demands made upon it are increased this will inevitably place strains upon the relationship between the Commission and Parliament because Commissioners will be unable successfully to combine the conflicting demands of running their departments in Brussels, dealing with Member States in national capitals and elsewhere, and attending properly to Parliamentary matters.

In passing, I would also like to draw your attention to a different set of objections to changing the basis upon which the Commission is selected. The Founding Fathers envisaged that the Commission would be a political body. To help give it political credibility, the Treaty endowed the Commission, which takes its decisions by majority vote, with a composition designed broadly speaking to reflect the political weight of the Member States. It is not unreasonable to suppose that some at least outside the Commission who wish to change the basis on which it is chosen hope to use the pretext of concern for the Commission's efficiency covertly to reduce its political authority. Yet it seems to me that the need for a political Commission is just as great in 1978 as it was in 1957. And even if others disagree, it would surely be wrong to make a major change of this kind ostensibly on/narrowly administrative grounds without full and open consideration of the wider implications.

Bolder proposals

Returning to the issue of the relations between the Commission and the Parliament, the Commission will of course have to do more, if it is to enter a constructive partnership with the Parliament, than devote adequate time to Parliamentary matters. It will also have to ensure that wherever possible its own proposals are in harmony with Parliament's views.

One of the permanent dilemmas which the Commission faces when preparing measures for submission to the Council is whether to propose the far reaching schemes for developing the Community which it would ideally like to see - and for which the Parliament is very often pressing - or whether instead to advance much more modest proposals of a kind more likely to be palatable to national governments. Usually the Commission chooses the latter course because it not unreasonably fears that if it asks the Council for too much it may end up receiving assent to nothing at all. A directly elected Parliament, however, is likely to press the Commission^{very hard} to take a much bolder line and in my view the Commission would be ill-advised always to refuse to do so.

Yet if the Commission proposes bolder measures how is it going to avoid provoking stiffer resistance in the Council? I can see no easy solution to this difficulty. It is to be hoped of course that the directly elected Parliament will itself exert pressure upon the Council to react more constructively to the Commission's proposals. But such pressure on its own is unlikely to be sufficient for the purpose. I am therefore increasingly convinced that the Commission will have to revise its own approach to the task of persuading national governments to pursue European objectives.

At present the Commission concentrates mainly though by no means exclusively upon attempting to influence governments by means of private discussions with national Ministers and their officials behind closed doors. This is a vital task which must not be abandoned. But if the Commission is to have any hope of winning the assent for the more adventurous proposals which are likely to be the consequence of direct elections, if it is to persuade national Ministers to discard the blinkers which they too often wear when they survey the Community scene, then Commissioners will also have to be much more prepared than at present to step outside the corridors of power and robustly to enter the arena of public debate.

In the final analysis the conduct of the Community's national governments is largely determined by their perception of the attitudes and expectations of the national electorates to which they are responsible. What the Commission must try to do, therefore, is to explain to those electorates directly, by all the appropriate methods available to them, the substantial concrete benefits which Community action can bring them. They must try to persuade national electorates themselves to bring pressure on national governments to make proper use of the opportunities which the Community offers them.

This of course is a political task requiring political skills. But then, as I said earlier, the Commission is, and should remain, a political body.