

Extract from a speech by Christopher S. TUGENDHAT, Member of the Commission of the European Communities, at a Seminar organised by the European League for Economic Cooperation on Direct Elections on Friday 3 March 1978 in Glasgow

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Now that the Bill providing for Direct Elections has passed its Third Reading in the House of Commons, the main obstacle to such elections has been removed. In consequence it is at last possible - and also desirable - to shift the focus of public discussion concerning the future of the European Parliament.

Hitherto, public debate has necessarily centred upon the basic issue of whether or not the European citizen is entitled to participate more fully than at present in the Community's decision making procedures. But now that the threat to the extension of democratic rights in the Community posed by the opposition of a small minority in Britain has at last been removed, attention should be turned to the more practical and concrete topic of how best a directly elected Parliament can achieve the objectives which are proper to it.

#### The tasks of a directly elected European Parliament

The essential task of the European Parliament will be to make the Council of Ministers and the European Commission accountable to it for the policies they pursue.

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It is true that individual national ministers already have to answer for their behaviour in the Council to their own national parliaments. But what national parliaments cannot do is to question and influence the Council as a whole about the policies for which its Members are collectively responsible.

National Parliaments necessarily have constitutional powers over a Minister only in his capacity as a member of a national government. National MPs can ask Mr Silkin or Herr Ertl, for example, why they pursued a particular policy over agricultural prices, and whether or not they succeeded in the objectives to which their national governments are committed. But they cannot force the Council as a corporate body to explain why it reached particular decisions, which sections of society within the Community will gain or lose, or how those decisions fit in with other European policy objectives. Only a supra-national body organised on a Community basis can hope to perform the vitally necessary task of forcing the Council fully to explain and justify its corporate acts.

Just because this is so, the effect of the European Parliament properly discharging this function, will not be to encroach upon the legitimate preserves of national Parliaments, but rather to secure an extension of democratic influence which ~~otherwise could not take place.~~

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Similarly, a single directly elected European Parliament will be in a position more closely to scrutinise and more substantially to influence the activities of the Commission than can nine separate national Parliaments.

I hope that one practical benefit of the more direct democratic control of the Commission which direct elections should achieve will be a much needed streamlining of the Community's management procedures.

At the moment many purely management - as distinct from law-making activities - in the Community, which could, and should, be delegated to the Commission have been jealously kept by the Council of Ministers in their own hands. This is one of the reasons why the Council has become over-burdened to the point where it is no longer always capable of efficiently conducting its business. However, once the Council is satisfied that the Commission is subject to more thorough democratic disciplines, it ought to be willing to relinquish to us greater responsibility of this kind.

The methods adopted by the directly elected Parliament

But the introduction of direct elections will not of itself be sufficient to ensure that the European Parliament exercises the appropriate degree of influence over the Community's other main institutions. Everything will depend on the manner in which the Parliament conducts itself in the face of a number of formidable problems.

The 410 members of the new Parliament will include people from many different national backgrounds; some of whom will have experience of their national legislatures, some of whom will not. In these circumstances, it will not be easy for Euro-MPs to agree and to apply appropriate working procedures.

Unlike most national Parliaments, but like the American Congress, the directly elected European Parliament will not possess the power to form governments. Since this is so, I believe that the Parliament should follow Congress's example and endeavour to make its impact primarily by developing the use of its existing powers to demand information, principally through the agency of its Committee system; and by using the information it acquires in this fashion as the basis of a rigorous and well-publicised evaluation of the other institution's activities. This would be a more fruitful approach for the Parliament than would be the concentration of its efforts upon what would almost certainly be a futile attempt to extend its formal legal authority.

#### The need for Parliament to speak with a coherent voice

But Parliament will not be able to exert much influence by this means if it speaks with too many voices. Little moral authority will be at the disposal of the body which is divided by a welter of conflicting factional or national viewpoints. If it is to command attention and respect, a directly elected Parliament will have to be capable of formulating a coherent and widely agreed view of how the Community should develop, and of the policies which it should pursue.

The European Democratic Union

One precondition of achieving this will 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.

Perhaps as a Conservative - and contrary to the belief of some, a Commissioner is not supposed to abandon on appointment his personal political beliefs or convictions - I may be allowed to take this opportunity of saying how particularly concerned I am to see the development of closer cooperation between the parties of the Centre-Right; and how much, therefore, I welcome the proposed formation of the European Democratic Union - an organisation bringing together European Centre-Right parties in countries both within and without the Community - which, I hope, will be formally inaugurated shortly.

The Labour and Liberal Parties have already joined European groupings in the European Parliament instead of sitting there as separate entities. Both Britain and the Community as a whole stand to gain a great deal from a more active involvement in Community-wide policies than has been the case until now by British politicians of all shades of opinion.