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D I R E C T E L E C T I O N S

In the past few years it has become part of the conventional wisdom of European discussion to say that our community is more attractive to outsiders than to those who live in it. This indeed is one of the things we regularly say to ourselves in Brussels, to cheer ourselves up. It is, after all, refreshing to turn from the relative apathy of many community citizens, and the wariness of some governments, to the fervent enthusiasm with which Greece and Portugal and Spain conduct their drive to become signatories of the Treaty of Rome. The achievements of the Community, and its possibilities for further triumph are more clearly seen from Athens and Madrid than they are from London or Copenhagen.

Indeed I would think that even in countries which have no aspiration to join the E.E.C. - such as the United States - there is a stronger impression of the Community's weight and significance in the world than there sometimes is in the nine member states themselves.

This degree of apathy which I describe in Europe is not necessarily a reason for panic, still less a sign of failure. Popular apathy is often one of the penalties of success in the political realm. Western Europe has enjoyed a generation of unprecedented growth in wealth combined with a blessed freedom from political turmoil. My own country has been - and still is - tragically visited by political violence. But Ireland, with a total population under five million, finds itself a troubled exception in a peaceful community of more than two hundred and fifty million people. Indeed the image which we in Ireland saw of a vast union, as notable for its harmony as its prosperity, was one of the main influences which caused us to vote so overwhelmingly in favour of signing the Treaty of Rome in 1973.

This great European triumph - for that is what it has been - was of course created in the wake of an even greater European disaster. It would be wrong to mention it here without also recognising how much American goodwill and practical American support had to do with the fashioning of that triumph.

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With your support Europe did move, soon after the war, to those "broad, sunlit uplands" which Churchill had promised. (I am not sure that the new landscape would have delighted him in all its aspects, but he would have had to acknowledge the general fulfilment of his prophecy.) The doomsday men who were so prominent in our intellectual community were happily in error. Cyril Connolly said many years ago that it was "closing time in the gardens of the West." The gardens are still open, still the property of the people who tend them.

But all of this good fortune, it is impossible to deny, has brought with it more than its share of tedium and apathy. One of the conditions of Europe's success has been that it has relinquished all dreams of foreign conquest as quickly as it has given up the fruits of its previous conquests. Now as it happens the new European policy towards, let us say, the countries of Africa is, in my view, something to be proud of, comprising as it does a model for a potential world-wide system as well as a mutually satisfactory arrangement between an important group of rich and poor countries.

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But the Lomé Convention, we have to admit with great regret, is not yet something which moves the mass of European citizens to any particular excitement. I mention Lomé because it is one of the real achievements of the Community in the past decade. Other achievements have on the whole failed to win the popular acclaim - or, I would rather say, the sense of popular involvement - which is their due. If we in the Community are to develop this kind of involvement - as I think we must - we have to do it primarily through the instrument of Direct Elections. That is why, as I see it, the elections will be among the most important events - rivalled only by the Mediterranean enlargement - which the Community will experience in the next few years.

I want to develop this theme in a moment. But first - if you will bear with me - a little more history, to enable me to come at the point from a different angle.

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It seems to me that the history of the Community falls into three rather identifiable phases. There is first the early, confident phase which spanned the seven or eight years after the Rome Treaty was signed in 1957. Indeed that phase also included what one might call the prehistory of the Community, going back to the establishment of the Coal and Steel Community in 1952.

This period was marked by the efforts of a very active, crusading community executive - first the High Authority, later the European Commission - which sought to propel the Member States - at the time, just six of them - towards a rapid integration of their economic, commercial and legal systems. The object of this process was clearly seen as the establishment, within a measurable time, of a close European Union - even, as Jean Monnet put it, a "United States of Europe."

The governing idea of the men who devised this policy, and sought its implementation with such energy, could without undue violence be described as a horror of Nationalism in Europe arising from the gross excesses committed in its name during World War Two.

The efforts of these founding fathers - as they are sometimes called - were sustained by a steadily rising prosperity attributable in part to the various stages of European integration already achieved. In those days it was easy for federalists to believe that their Europe would soon emerge, smoothly and without pain, from among the dwindling remnants of the old Nation States.

Then, of course, something happened to check that confident progress. An extraordinarily vigorous proponent of the nation state appeared on the scene to re-assert its claims. De Gaulle, I think, may be said to have brought the first phase of the Community to an end. Perhaps the terminal date was the Empty Chair crisis of 1965.

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I think of the Community's second or middle phase as lasting from 1965 to 1973. It was marked like the first by a continued steady growth in living standards. The unifiers and federalists were forced to lower their profile, and to accept a shift of power away from the Commission to the Council. But this was still an important period of consolidation for Commission policies - notably the Agricultural Policy - and besides no one could feel the situation was static at a time when Britain, together with Denmark and Ireland, was preparing to join the Community and inevitably alter its character in a profound way.

That second phase lasted until 1973. Then the new members joined, and were scarcely seated when the oil crisis broke upon us all and brought with it a trauma which has not subsided yet. Living standards dropped sharply for the first time since the immediate post-war period. Unemployment and inflation mounted alarmingly. European currency rates, never very strongly aligned, began to diverge in a serious way. Perhaps the worst development, from the Community perspective, was that

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(..individual countries....)

individual countries tried to seek their own remedies. European unity seemed fragile when faced with the oil and energy crises.

It was doubly unfortunate that this time of trouble coincided with the delicate operation of grafting three new members onto the original six. Britain, Denmark and Ireland joined in January 1973; the storm broke just eleven months later. From the beginning it was clear that Britain and Denmark were extremely reserved, both in a political and a popular sense, towards the Community which they had joined.

I'm glad to say that Ireland, by contrast, was enthusiastic, but given the vastly preponderant size of Britain this could make only a minor difference.

The net effect of that first enlargement was that the Community had admitted important new forces which were sceptical about many of its means and some of its ends - and this at a moment which would in any event have been marked by the utmost internal strain. Soon afterwards there followed the curious exercise of British renegotiation, as Harold Wilson called it. This did have the result, in the end, of consolidating British membership, but the scepticism which I mentioned in Britain and Denmark is still disturbingly in evidence.

If I am approximately right about the three phases of the Community's life so far, I would say that the third phase is still with us, but is drawing to a close. Whether its successor will be better or worse, viewed from a Brussels perspective, I cannot say. But it will certainly be different.

The difference will be ensured by the Mediterranean enlargement - the admission of Greece, Portugal and Spain-- which we hope to see within the next few years. The enlargement is something to rejoice over. I hope it will broaden and strengthen the Community, and will on the other hand serve to sustain the democratic choices which these countries have made with so much determination.

But one has to admit that the enlargement could also bring additional strains to the community. The first enlargement has not been an unqualified success. The second could tend to weaken the E.E.C. until eventually it became no more than an intergovernmental trading arrangement.

To guard against this there will have to be a conscious effort in the near future to renew the community institutions, to restore the momentum towards union which has been lost in these past difficult years, and above all to enlist the enthusiasm of the ordinary citizens in the member states for our common venture.

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I believe President Jenkins has already taken an important step in the general direction I am indicating with his new campaign for Economic and Monetary Union. But I believe the crucial source of that fresh energy which the Community now needs will be the direct elections to the European Parliament.

It is a strange thought that this now rather venerable structure, the E.E.C., has never had a direct endorsement from the people who live in it, if you exclude the referenda held in applicant countries before and after the 1973 enlargement. The people have been involved in the community process only at one remove - in that they elect governments who thereafter decide policy through the Council of Ministers, and of course retain the power to choose, each four years, the members of the European Commission. But when the electors go to the polls in the member states they are only marginally interested in European issues. Their concern, as in most elections most of the time, is with domestic matters.

So this community, which we like to think of as a beacon and safeguard of democracy, actually lacks a direct democratic endorsement from the citizens of Europe. It is not surprising then to find evidence that many citizens are deeply confused about the activities and purposes of the Community, and some are not interested enough to be confused. On the one hand we have the Council, its individual members answerable to national electorates, but not, as a Council, directly accountable to the voters. Moreover its proceedings are entirely secret, and news of them usually emerges through selective leaks or briefings given by individual ministers - who inevitably tend to present their accounts from particular national perspectives.

Then there is the Commission, originally seen by its supporters as an embryonic federal government, but for the present accepting a more limited mandate. It is perhaps more open about its proceedings than the Council, and it has been careful to resist those who would reduce it to a bureaucratic rather than a political function. But again it finds barriers of incomprehension between itself and many sections of the public, and it was perhaps marked by a certain elitism and an unduly technocratic character in its early years.

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What I am describing in the Community institutions is a phenomenon analysed, as you will know, by a number of political scientists. It has been variously called the problem of intelligibility, of visibility, of accessibility, of transparency. The terms as analytically used each stand for a distinct problem, but together these problems constitute a barrier between the community and the ordinary citizen.

I see direct elections to the Parliament as the decisive step in dismantling the barrier. Now it is true that the present non-elected Parliament is as much, if not more, a victim of the problems I have mentioned as is any other institution. It is also true that direct elections will not necessarily or inevitably resolve the problems, make clear what is now opaque, transform Parliament into a window through which the voter may observe and feel involved in all the activities of the Community.

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Things will not be so simple. The difficulties under which the parliament now labours are very severe, and will not suddenly go away on the morrow of direct elections. (I shall not, unless you wish me to, describe these difficulties in detail now, because I have perhaps spoken for long enough. But when we move on to our discussion I shall be happy to list the vexatious problems which the European Parliament has in carving out its role. We might also discuss how the Parliament might alter its procedures and seek to extend its powers after direct elections - that is, begin to ease its way out of the rather tight constraints which bind it now - without precipitating a constitutional crisis within the Community.)

For the present I would only say that while Parliament's powers are undoubtedly limited, its influence is very considerable, and growing all the time. Moreover its powers are limited in a rather paradoxical way, namely that they are in fact relatively immense, but of such a character as to be liable, "if ever used in present circumstances, to inflict more damage on the user than on the intended victim.

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If I were to state the object of this whole exercise in terms of a single political objective I would say it was to enhance the legitimacy of our Community institutions. It is true that democratic involvement alone does not guarantee legitimacy, but I think it is also clear that in our system you cannot have legitimacy without democracy. This is not to say that the Community so far has been lacking in legitimacy. But the kind it has enjoyed has been aptly called a "derivative legitimacy." Let it now become direct.

Hence they have never been employed. But that balance of advantage and risk might not apply if a directly-elected parliament had behind it a strong popular mandate.

So it is that one of the critical aspects of the direct elections - in some ways the only one - will be the turn-out of voters. We can return to this question later. I can only say now that the postponement of the poll from early Summer of this year may in the end prove to have been a blessing in disguise.

For if, as I hope, the European Council - that is, the regular summit gathering of heads of government - commits us to an absolutely firm date in 1978 then we shall have something that was missing until now, namely a precise target which will not recede because of the whim or the difficulties of one or other member state. In those circumstances all the community interests can work purposefully to reach the voters, and to involve them directly for the first time in the issues of European integration.

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