

SPEECH BY MR. CHRISTOPHER TUGENDHAT, VICE-PRESIDENT  
OF THE COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES,  
TO A MEETING OF THAMES VALLEY EURO-CONSTITUENCY  
AT CUMBERLAND LODGE, WINDSOR, ON THURSDAY,  
14 JULY 1983 AT 19.30 HRS.

BRITONS ABROAD LOOK TO MR. BRITTAN.

NOW THAT THE DUST OF ELECTORAL BATTLE HAS BEGUN TO SETTLE, THE QUEEN'S SPEECH HAS BEEN MADE, AND THE GOVERNMENT IS GETTING DOWN TO IMPLEMENTATION OF ITS PROGRAMME, AN URGENT PROBLEM AWAITS THE NEW HOME SECRETARY, MY OLD FRIEND MR. LEON BRITTAN. IT CONCERNS THE RIGHTS OF BRITISH CITIZENS LIVING AND WORKING ABROAD.

UNLIKE MANY AMERICANS, AUSTRALIANS AND NEW ZEALANDERS THEY ARE AT PRESENT DISENFRANCHISED. THEY WERE UNABLE TO VOTE IN THE RECENT WESTMINSTER ELECTION, AND IF SOMETHING IS NOT DONE SOON THEY WILL BE UNABLE TO VOTE IN THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS NEXT YEAR.

IT SHOULD BE A GOVERNMENT PRIORITY TO INTRODUCE A BILL QUICKLY GRANTING THE RIGHT TO VOTE IN EUROPEAN AND WESTMINSTER ELECTIONS TO SUCH BRITISH CITIZENS IN TIME FOR THEM TO BE INCLUDED IN THE 1984 ELECTORAL REGISTER.

/ THIS MATTER

THIS MATTER HAS NOW BEEN EXAMINED BY TWO COMMITTEES OF PARLIAMENT WHICH HAVE BOTH RECOGNIZED THE JUSTICE OF THE CASE AND RECOMMENDED ACTION. THE HOUSE OF LORDS SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES PRODUCED A REPORT ON ELECTIONS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT WHICH RECOMMENDED, AS AN INTERIM MEASURE UNTIL THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS DECIDES ON FRANCHISE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY, AN EXTENSION OF THE FRANCHISE FOR EUROPEAN ELECTIONS BASED ON PREVIOUS RESIDENCE AND REGISTRATION IN THE UK.

THE HOUSE OF COMMONS HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE REPORT ON THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE ACTS, PUBLISHED IN APRIL THIS YEAR, WENT FURTHER. IT RECOMMENDED THAT "ALL UK CITIZENS RESIDENT IN EEC COUNTRIES WHO HAVE AT ANY TIME PREVIOUSLY LIVED IN THE UK SHOULD BE PERMITTED TO VOTE IN BRITISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, AND THAT THEIR VOTE SHOULD BE EXERCISED IN THE CONSTITUENCY IN WHICH THEY WERE LAST REGISTERED OR WHERE THEY RETAIN A RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY".

/ THESE RECOMMENDATIONS

THESE RECOMMENDATIONS MUST BE ACTED ON PROMPTLY. THEY ARE NOT THEORETICAL OPTIONS WHICH CAN BE ALLOWED TO GATHER DUST ON THE SHELVES, OR WHICH CAN CONTINUE TO BE DEBATED INDEFINITELY. THEY AFFECT THE BASIC DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS OF SOME 2 1/4 MILLION BRITISH CITIZENS WHOSE WORK, OR WHOSE SPOUSES' WORK, IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE OR PRIVATE INDUSTRY INVOLVES LIVING ELSEWHERE IN THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY. THE ARGUMENTS OF PRINCIPLE ARE OVERWHELMING.

WHY THEN THE APPARENT LACK OF URGENCY? TWO MAIN PROBLEMS ARE RAISED, NEITHER OF WHICH I BELIEVE TO BE INSUPERABLE. THERE IS THE ARGUMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE DIFFICULTY IN REGISTERING AND PROVIDING AN APPROPRIATELY RELIABLE METHOD OF VOTING FOR THIS SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF ADDITIONAL ELECTORS. BUT THE COMMONS HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE LOOKED INTO THIS ARGUMENT IN SOME DETAIL AND CAME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT A MEASURE LIMITED TO BRITISH CITIZENS LIVING ELSEWHERE IN THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY COULD BE APPLIED WITH EQUAL FACILITY TO EUROPEAN AND WESTMINSTER ELECTIONS.

/ THE ARGUMENT

THE ARGUMENT THAT SOME BRITONS LIVING ABROAD ARE TAX EXILES OR HAVE EFFECTIVELY SEVERED THEIR TIES WITH THE UK HAS SOME FORCE, BUT IT DOES NOT PROVIDE A REASON WHY THE MAJORITY TO WHOM THIS DOES NOT APPLY SHOULD BE PENALIZED. MOST BRITISH SUBJECTS LIVING IN OTHER MEMBER STATES ARE DOING AN IMPORTANT JOB FOR BRITISH BUSINESS AND BRITISH EXPORTS, OR ARE WORKING IN EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS. BY AND LARGE THEY RETAIN CLOSE LINKS AND INTERESTS IN THE UK, AND INTEND TO RETURN HERE. THE OLD IDEA THAT ALL BRITONS ABROAD LIVE IN VILLAS ON THE CÔTE D'AZUR NEEDS A LOT OF UPDATING.

IN ANY CASE, IF A SYSTEM IS IMPLEMENTED WHICH PLACES ON BRITISH CITIZENS ABROAD WISHING TO VOTE THE ONUS IN CONTACTING THEIR EMBASSY THE PROBLEM OF THOSE WHOSE LINKS WITH THE UK HAVE BECOME TENUOUS IS LIKELY TO SOLVE ITSELF. ONLY THOSE WHO REMAIN COMMITTED TO THE UK AND INTERESTED IN ITS AFFAIRS ARE LIKELY TO EXERCISE THAT RIGHT.

/ A QUALIFICATION

A QUALIFICATION REQUIRING PREVIOUS RESIDENCE IN THE UK WOULD SEEM TO BE THE MOST REASONABLE PROOF OF "CONNECTION". IT WOULD ALSO HAVE THE BENEFIT OF PROVIDING AN APPROPRIATE CONSTITUENCY IN WHICH THE VOTER CAN BE REGISTERED, SO THAT MANIPULATION OF LARGE MOBILE BLOCKS OF VOTES CANNOT ARISE. WHETHER ANY TIME LIMIT CAN OR SHOULD BE PLACED ON PREVIOUS RESIDENCE IS AN OPEN QUESTION. THE LORDS AND COMMONS COMMITTEES DISAGREED ON THIS POINT, THE FORMER RECOMMENDING A SEVEN-YEAR LIMIT, THE LATTER POINTING OUT THAT THIS COULD GIVE RISE TO LARGE NUMBERS OF HARD CASES AND EXCLUDE MANY OF THOSE CURRENTLY ACTIVE IN DEMANDING THE RIGHT TO VOTE. IT WOULD NOT SEEM FAIR TO IMPOSE A LIMIT IN ANY REFORM MEASURE WHICH HAD THE EFFECT OF EXCLUDING ALL BRITISH CITIZENS WHO JOINED COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS IN 1973 AS THE SPEARHEAD OF BRITAIN'S EFFORT IN EUROPE.

THE GREAT BROADCASTER EDWARD MURROW SAID THAT "WE CANNOT DEFEND FREEDOM ABROAD BY DESERTING IT AT HOME". IT COULD BE ADDED THAT SERVING THE INTERESTS OF BRITAIN ABROAD SHOULD NOT BE AT THE EXPENSE OF ONE'S DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS AT HOME.

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NOTE EMBARGO