

Introductory address by Mr. Frans ANDRIESEN, Member of
the Commission, to the European Democrats

Copenhagen, 5 May 1982

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you here today. I welcome this opportunity of having a more informal exchange of views and the subject you have chosen lends itself particularly well to this.

Before dealing in some detail with developments in relations between the Commission and Parliament let me first place them in a wider context : these relations, after all, cannot be judged in isolation ; they are part of the wider network of relations between the Commission, Parliament and the Council. And we are all only too well aware that the functioning, or rather non-functioning, of the Council plays an important part here.

In this company I know that I can dispense with the usual analysis of the Community's decision-making process.

It is abundantly clear that it leaves a lot to be desired, as the immobilism of recent years has demonstrated. This has not only eroded the Community's ability to take decisions, but has also upset the institutional balance provided for in the Treaties.

- The main reason for -

The main reason for the present imbalance is the growing influence of intergovernmental elements in the decision-making process. It is reflected in the Council's insistence on unanimity and its reluctance to delegate important administrative and managerial functions to the Commission.

Any of you who would like to know more about the Commission's thinking on these two points should look at part two of our report on inter-institutional relations, published last October.

I only mention this because I feel that, however useful and necessary an improvement of Parliament's position vis à vis the Commission may be, it must not be allowed to aggravate the present institutional imbalance.

To my mind a return to more "communautaire" decision-making within the Council has always been a prerequisite for improved functioning of both the Commission and Parliament. The stronger the intergovernmental element in Council decision-making, the harder it is for Parliament to exercise democratic control.

I think I can safely say that the relationship between Parliament and the Commission has become more political since direct elections. Political contacts between the two

institutions have been intensified, and there is no doubt that the Commission takes more notice than it used to of Parliament's views and opinions.

In committee and in plenary session dialogue between the Commission and Parliament is increasingly active, in form and in substance. The Commission pointed this out during the July debate last year, and we said it again in our October report.

The changes you have made to your Rules of Procedure have more or less focused us into a process of political conciliation within the wider framework of Parliament's consultative role. This has made us change our original proposal in a number of cases.

This demonstrates that it is perfectly feasible for Parliament to use the Commission as a lever to gain more influence over the legislative process.

Where Parliament's influence is limited, it is of the utmost importance, in my view, that the general level of debates and the content of resolutions adopted should clearly reflect Parliament's constancy of purpose and consistency of judgement.

The slimmer one's powers, the more convincing one's arguments must be. And I hope you won't mind my saying that Parliament

does not always come up to standard. The recent opinion on farm prices was totally incoherent. I am quite sure that adoption of that resolution has done nothing to improve Parliament's image.

The central question in the institutional debate is : how can Parliament gain more influence over the Community decision-making process. But the problem is that the institutional imbalance and intrusion of the intergouvernemental element have made it even more difficult for Parliament to get a grip on the Community's supreme decision-making body, the Council.

This is why it is so important to pressure the Council into taking part in the debate. This is why inter-institutional agreements are attractive ; they force the Council to put its cards on the table.

Why do you think we submitted a proposal to improve and extend the legislative conciliation procedure ? Why do you think we insisted from the outset that the proposal be discussed on a tripartite basis ?

So far our efforts have been in vain. Indeed, I am rather puzzled at Parliament's failure to take action itself to get talks going.

-The conciliation procedure is -

The conciliation procedure is quite important. It is, after all, a first step towards shared legislative powers.

Last week, in the House, I announced and explained some concrete proposals concerning international agreements. Today, the Commission is sending a communication on the subject to Parliament and Council. Here again, the Council is being drawn into the institutional debate.

It is important to get a tripartite dialogue going in this area too, to get the cards on the table that much sooner.

There seems to be a fair chance of this tripartite approach bearing fruit in at least one field in the near future.

I am thinking, of course, of conciliation. If all goes well, we should have an agreement on the classification of expenditure by mid-June.

Let me return now to relations between the Commission and Parliament.

There have been a number of improvements. The Commission has become more receptive to political signals from Parliament : it is more willing to respond to Parliament's initiatives ; and it is more prepared to supply information to Parliament, partly to make it easier for Parliament to exercise democratic control.

- This brings me to the -

This brings me to the debate on follow-up action on Parliament's resolutions and opinions, one of the procedures which make it easier for you to exercise democratic control.

As far as the Commission is concerned we could provide direct actual information and bi-annual view of the follow-up of Parliamentary resolutions.

Parliament - and your Group - claims that this procedure needs to be improved. I agree entirely.

At present the procedure suffers from two major defects : the range of subjects which can be raised needs to result in long debates which are short on quality. The Commissioner holding the portfolio is unable to attend more often than not and the lack of adequate preparation does nothing to improve the quality of the debate.

I think it would be a good idea if debates in plenary session were confined to formulating opinions in the context of Parliament's consultative role and perhaps to the last two sittings.

The follow-up to opinions and own-initiative resolutions would probably be best dealt with by the appropriate Committee. This would mean that matters could be discussed in the presence of the Commissioner holding the portfolio. This would not exclude the possibility of certain matters finding their way to the plenary session via the committees.

These are just a few suggestions, which I intend to raise with Parliament's Bureau in the near future.

Commissioners are more than willing to attend meetings of Parliament's committees and explain the Commission's policy and actions. We are also prepared to facilitate discussing within these committees by supplying briefs and the like beforehand. It would obviously be helpful if committees could stick to their agendas and notify members when a Commissioner plans to appear, thereby ensuring reasonable attendance. You know as well as I do that agendas are frequently changed and that attendance is often poor. Given its steady flow of criticism the Commission from Parliament, I trust you will take it in good part if we criticise Parliament's *modus operandi* from time to time.

Your report attaches great importance to the Commission being given administrative and managerial responsibilities. The fact of the matter is that the Council, an unwieldy, almost intergovernmental body, is hanging on to all kinds of executive powers which would be better and more efficiently exercised by the Commission.

I believe that far greater use should be made of the last indent of Article 155 of the EEC Treaty.

- In practice, however, the -

I believe, however, the Council is extremely reluctant to delegate powers. And if it finally does decide to do so, it attaches all sorts of strings in the form of supervision by the Member States.

My own impression is that the real problem is obstruction at staff level within the Council, rather than a lack of political will on the part of the ministers.

Civil servants, almost by definition, are reluctant to relinquish authority, and ministers do not always know their way around the Charlemagne's labyrinthine bureaucracy.

And talking of bureaucracy - or rather Eurocracy - its main strongholds are the European departments of national administrations which have come to power thanks to the Community.

Where the Commission has been given executive powers, it makes full use of them. You only have to look at market and price policy in agriculture, competition, coal and steel ; many other examples I could quote.

To put it in a nutshell, the problem is not the optimal use of existing powers, but the reluctance to grant new ones. The Commission is assisted in its executive function by so-called management committees. In some areas - for instance agriculture - everyone is satisfied with this arrangement, as I am sure Sir Henry PLUMB will agree.

Problems arise when attempts are made to curtail the Commission's executive responsibilities, in relation to harmonization of legislation for instance, or food aid.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the Commission keeping in touch with what goes on in different sectors. But the really important thing - for Parliament's supervisory role too - is to ensure that the decision-making process remains clear and unambiguous, and that responsibilities are clearly defined.

Your Group has asked the Commission to produce an action programme for making full use of existing powers. You will have realized from what I have just said, that the problem is not really one of existing executive power.

What we really need now is for the institutions, particularly the Council, to agree on an action programme in which each institution would have a specific role and specific responsibilities.

You will find suggestions for a programme along these lines in our May Mandate proposals, on which the Council has so far failed to act.

The Commission has now produced a supplementary programme, which concentrates on employment, investment and strengthening of the E.M.S.

No matter how you look at it, you always come back to the same point : we need a measure of political commitment from the Council. On this the Commission and Parliament are allies.

I would like to conclude, Mr. Chairman, with a few words about the general political and institutional situation. The present institutional debate is ranging far beyond improvements that might be made within the context of the existing Treaties. Take, for instance, the work now being done by your Institutional Affairs Committee.

Nor is the debate confined to Parliament. The European Act, proposed by Mr. Genscher and Mr. Colombo, has been under discussion in the Council for some time.

As you know, the main points of this proposal are a "rapprochement" between the political cooperation and Community apparatus, a Community foreign policy, a European approach to security, the extension of European cooperation to new areas, such as culture and justice, and a number of suggestions about the functioning of the institutions in general and Parliament in particular.

The advantage of the parliamentary approach to the debate on institutional renewal is that it is public.

- I am less than happy that the -

I am less than happy that the draft European Act is being worked on by the Council, in the backroom of political cooperation. I am afraid that, in the end, all attempts at renewal will be swept under the carpet, leaving us with a sterile document full of official platitudes.

I would deplore such a development. The Genscher-Colombo proposal has at least given fresh impetus to the institutional debate. It could also be a first step towards a broadening of Europe's political base.

One final remark, Mr. Chairman.

Institutional renewal is certainly desirable and necessary. But the debate must not be used as an excuse for avoiding policy decisions.

The two must go hand in hand.