



*European Communities
Commission
Press Release*

20 Kensington Palace Gardens
London W8 4QQ
Telephone: 01-727 8090

ISEC/20/78

June 30, 1978

CHRISTOPHER TUGENDHAT SPEAKS ON EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

The following are extracts from a speech given by Christopher Tugendhat, EEC Commissioner responsible for the budget, at the European Briefing Conference of the Conservative and Unionist Central Office, at 11.45 am on Saturday, July 1, at Burford Bridge Hotel, Dorking.

"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.

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 MPs will be to set their sights upon acquiring powers in relation to the Community's other institutions analogous to 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

"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.

.../

"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.

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 driven 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.

"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 socialist parties of different nationalities 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. 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

"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. 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 MPs 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.

I would like to draw your attention to 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.

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."