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BACKGROUND NOTE

" P O W E R T O T H E P A R L I A M E N T "

The European translation for "power to the people" seems now to be "power to the Parliament." That was the rallying cry of British Member of Parliament (MP) Peter Kirk as the European Community's Parliament opened its first session since the EC's enlargement to include the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Ireland.

Long the weakest of the Community's institutions, the European Parliament neither has the usual legislative powers nor is directly elected. The traditionally parliamentary-minded British, among others, hope to change that. In particular, the Conservative Group (comprising 18 British and two Danish MP's) put forward a memorandum on January 16 calling for:

- more searching questioning of the European Commission and Council of Ministers
- greater initiative for individual MP's
- more topical debates
- increased consideration of overall policy problems and less discussion of technical detail by parliamentary committees
- fewer but larger committee meetings
- quicker and wider publicity for Parliamentary activities

Apart from these internal changes, the memorandum urged the Parliament to take up a firmer stance vis-à-vis the other Community institutions. It proposed that:

- The sanction of a motion of censure, on the threat of such a motion, of the Commission should be exploited.
- The Parliament should try to persuade the Commission to give the Parliament longer time to consider its policy proposals.
- The Parliament should exercise tighter control over the other institutions' administrative budgets and procedures.

Parliament Should Assert Self

"Throughout this memorandum our remarks and our proposals have had a single underlying aim," said the Conservative MP's. "We believe that the Parliament already has sufficient latent powers to enable it to play a major part in shaping the future of the enlarged Communities. We believe it must seek to use these powers to the fullest possible extent. The function of the Parliament is not to act as a technical advisory agency to the Commission or the Council of Ministers on the lines of the Economic and Social Committee. It must see itself in more directly political terms as an assembly representing the people of Europe and exercising democratic control over the Community institutions. The Parliament should not feel the need to shelter behind unanimity in order to influence the Council of Ministers and the European Commission. It should make its political differences clear, for these reflect the political divisions among the people of Europe. The need for more formal powers -- particularly in the field of legislation -- is clear. If the Parliament is seen to be politically relevant, we believe it will, with the support of the electorate, obtain those powers more easily and more speedily."

With the Community's enlargement the role of the European Parliament assumed vital significance, said the memorandum. "Only through the development of an effective instrument of democratic control can the ideal of closer European union hope to be achieved. For such a union will depend largely on the active participation of the peoples of Europe, on their growing belief in themselves as citizens of Europe as well as of their national communities. That belief will only develop if the European peoples, our constituents, can feel confident that their views as Europeans are represented, and represented in the Community institutions.

"The main aim of our proposals is to strengthen the role of the Parliament as the only European forum for the scrutiny, control, and constructive criticism of the executive institutions of the Community by the representatives of the citizens of the Communities."

Questions to the Council of Ministers and Commission

The Conservative Group supported the proposal by the Legal Affairs Committee to introduce one hour's question time each part-session, i.e., once a month. (This proposal was adopted later in the January part-session by the Parliament.)

The Conservatives also proposed that questions should be brief and to the point, should seek precise information, should not be followed by debates, should be the prerogative of individual MP's, and that the political groups should limit their role at question time.

Topical Debates

On urgent matters, individual members should be able to seek leave from the President, at the beginning of each part-session, to introduce a motion, bypassing the present system under which all matters are first considered by the relevant committees, the Conservatives proposed.

Individual members should in any event be allocated a definite, if limited, period of time for short debates during each part-session, without reference to committees. Sufficient notice would normally be given to enable the appropriate Minister or Commission member to attend at Strasbourg or Luxembourg.

Committees

The memorandum suggested that the parliamentary committees should spend less time scrutinizing detailed legislation, important though it is in its place, and more time discussing general policy. They should be free to invite any institution or individual to give written or oral evidence and should hold as many hearings as are necessary, preferably in public.

Each month each main committee should hold one regular meeting lasting a full day, chiefly for the purpose of discussing general policy matters with the Commission member responsible. More technical matters would be reserved for other meetings of the committee at which committee members not directly involved and Commission members would not have such a strong obligation to attend.

Reporting Debates

The Conservatives feel that the multilanguage verbatim reports of debates should be discontinued. Instead, a summary report of every debate should be published as soon as possible in each Community language together with verbatim reports of speeches in the language concerned. The full translation of all speeches could then follow.

Votes of Censure

Relations between the Parliament and the Commission are analogous to those between national parliaments and national governments, the Conservatives believe. The Parliament's advantage can only be fully realized by the occasional use of the sanctions it has against the Commission. A motion of

censure might be tabled not with the serious intention of dismissing the Commission but to add point and urgency to the debates the Parliament felt to be exceptionally vital. In this way the Commission could be steered towards policies favored by the Parliamentary majority.

Consultation

In the Conservatives' opinion, the Commission should give much longer advance notice of its major legislative proposals and allow the Parliament more time to express its opinion before final proposals are made to the Council.

Budgetary Powers

The fact that the Parliament is so far restricted to control of the Community's administrative budget does not seriously weaken its position: "It can hold a Democles' sword over the executive institutions and their officials; if necessary, it should be prepared to use the sword," said the Conservatives.

The Parliament should use this budgetary power to insist on the detailed accountability of the other Community institutions to the Parliament and should establish a permanent committee and staff charged with this task, including an annual audit of the Community's accounts.

Unanimity

Finally, the Conservatives believe that the Parliament should not feel the need to shelter behind unanimity in order to influence the Council of Ministers and the European Commission. It should make its political differences clear, for these reflect the political divisions among the peoples of Europe.