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DOES THE COMMUNITY NEED A SOCIAL POLICY?

Conclusion of the
Speech by Dr. Patrick J. Hillery, Vice-President
of the Commission of the European Communities, to
the Financial Times / Irish Times conference
"Europe after the Referendum", at the Burlington
Hotel, Dublin, on Thursday, 24 July 1975

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I should like to conclude by trying to say something about this search for "quality" in social policy. As I have always taken it as given that in no aspect of politics can one find the philosophy or instrument that has all the answers - an *injectio sterilans magna*, if I remember my history of medicine correctly - to what does one turn in search of a potential source of real cohesion in Community social policy?

Just as I am confident that no general theory will solve our problems, so does it seem to be the case that there is no one policy initiative - or mix of initiatives - to which one can look with confidence. None of the world's developed economies have found the expertise which guarantees an upturn of economic growth and a return to stability in the medium-term. What then is left to be tried?

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The difficulties member States face in trying to move forward again towards full employment while struggling to achieve a degree of price stability are not just the hard edges of an abstract economic problem: they spring largely from the conflicting social pressures acting on governments.

Policies of an exclusively economic nature cannot therefore solve our current problems because they fail to resolve the basic inconsistency between what the people of Europe are now demanding and what European Governments are capable of delivering. The efforts and sacrifices required to overcome these difficulties demand fuller participation by the social partners in socio-economic decisions - such as those required in the elaboration of a medium-term socio-economic strategy for the Community.

This emphasis on the importance of participation echoes the ~~communique~~ of the first Paris Summit and the objectives of the Social Action Programme. Could participation be the root of cohesion and purpose in Community social policy?

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Participation is one of those concepts that everyone claims to respect but which in reality few like. Like any catalyst, its frightening power is that it may promote a chain of events, none of which may appear to be linked in a controlled pattern with the current situation. In this case the concept of participation appears to threaten the rights and privileges of established social and political forces, it seems to demand radical changes in institutional structures for which the Community, its member States and social forces often look ill-prepared. May it not be, however, that these are traits respectably shared with the idea of a directly elected European Parliament, for example, an idea which everyone accepts is bound to add its own unpredictable dimension to the pattern of European integration? And given that one is prepared to begin with a positive attitude towards the concept of participation, what does it mean to try to live with that concept? Like looking beyond International Women's Year, it means the drive must be found to ensure that a worthwhile re-orientation persists and deepens.

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Incredibly, despite the seriousness of the impact of unemployment and inflation on the peoples of the Community, there still seems to be a resistance to the institutional and administrative changes necessary to facilitate a coming together of social and political forces. Could it be that political decision-makers and leaders of management and labour are handicapped by attitudes rooted in the educational background of their economic and other advisers? Have the traditional rivalries between governmental departments with social and economic responsibilities something in common with that between the faculties of economics and social studies in most European universities? While many now pay lip-service to the necessity of a co-ordinated attack on the economic and social facets of our current recession, very few find themselves working in a framework which facilitates such a co-ordinated effort.

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One of the "Summit" decisions taken in Brussels last week may help to carry us some way through the complex of entrenched attitudes and artificial stances which I believe has held back national and community efforts at solving our socio-economic problems and creating a social policy - in the fullest meaning of the term - at Community level.

I quote from the post-Summit brief ".....

the European Council gave a favourable reception to the idea of a tripartite conference, requested by the European Trade Union Confederation, in which the Ministers of Economic Affairs and of Labour would take part, and invited the Commission to prepare appropriate proposals."

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The Commission will take up this invitation and discussed yesterday the best ways of ensuring adequate preparation for such a conference. This work will certainly demand closer co-operation between the economic and social directorates of the Commission than we have seen to date. Preparing for the conference will put similar pressures on social partners and governments. Given an opportunity of meaningful consultation with governments at Community level, there is a real incentive for both workers' and employers' representatives to articulate the true voice and commitment of their interest groups. Joint participation from the government side of both economic and labour ministers, coupling social concern and financial control, should be valuable at both national and Community levels. The social commitment of both member States and the Community has often been called into question by constraints which economic and budgetary interests succeeded in imposing on previously agreed guidelines in a way that appeared to alter their substance.

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But this is to digress too much into detail. The point I am making is that the discipline of participation, a discipline that thanks to the beginnings that have been made can be readily adopted, may be the instrument of integrating economic and social thinking and ensuring the involvement of both sides of industry in the preparation of decisions on social and economic issues - aspirations to which many have paid lip-service but none have achieved. The successful creation of a general framework for the purposes of ensuring permanent dialogue between governments, the Community institutions and the social partners would have the further merit that it should be free of any element of paternalism. Or is it too much to claim for the concept of participation that it can help to dissolve the unnatural tension between "voluntary" and "compulsory" policy approaches in the social field? Is it too much to hope that the formal charade of consultation between queues of interest group leaders and political spokesmen can give way to a continuous, routine and genuine working relationship?

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In identifying the need for a change of attitude in political, administrative and social partner circles as the distinctive qualitative element or essence of contemporary social policy, I am aware that I may be accused of saying no more than that virtue is a good thing. But that's how it is. Many of our problems really are about how to translate words into actions, problems, as it is fashionably put at Community level, of political will.

If cohesion through real dialogue can be achieved I believe that questions such as Whither the Community? and Does the Community need a Social Policy? will answer themselves. When you know the name of the tree, you know the name of the fruit. With real dialogue would emerge, I believe, a new institutional framework, new priorities, and that sense of a broadly based responsibility for the running of society without which any prospect of lasting economic, social and political progress - and particularly the prospect of a redistribution of resources - must be remote.