

Parliamentary democracy in Europe

By Richard Laming

Article Number 20

The European constitutional convention is dealing with some of the biggest political issues of our time

Political scientists and commentators specialise in looking for divisions among the members of the European constitutional convention: between large and small countries, between centralisers and decentralisers, between national parliaments and the European Parliament. But perhaps the most important dividing line is between those who want to increase the power of parliaments within the European political process, and those who want to increase the power of executives.

This debate is not just a European issue but is one that affects the whole of our democracy. It is something that many members of national parliaments in the European Union are only just now waking up to.

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At present, the nominal role of national parliaments is to scrutinise the actions of their respective national ministers in the Council of Ministers. This role is nominal both because of the working methods of the Council and because the national parliaments have not really focussed on it in the past.

It has been suggested that national parliaments might gain new rights in the EU legislative process in order to protect the principle of subsidiarity. However, giving national parliaments

a new legislative role in Brussels will make the passage of legislation even more cumbersome than it is at present and the workload of the national parliaments themselves will quickly become unmanageable.

A better idea is to give national parliaments more effective powers to hold their national ministers to account. The Council should act less like a committee of government representatives and more like an assembly of elected representatives. Its legislative sessions should be held in public; all proposals, minutes and decisions should be published.

But will ministers in the Council welcome this? Alain Lamassoure MEP observed that they like their current methods because it makes them "more remote from the scrutiny of prime ministers, national media and national parliaments – they have a wider margin for manoeuvre." (1) That is exactly why those working methods should change.

A further step in building a parliamentary Europe would be to give the European Parliament co-decision powers over all legislation and the budget. At present, its role is limited in some policy areas which leads to many problems.

For example, the European Parliament does not have the power of co-decision on agriculture: it may

express opinions but the expenditure (which is the heart of the matter) is agreed by the Council on its own.

This means that there is no real European debate about the future of agriculture. There is a series of national debates from which the European institutions are supposed to synthesise a European viewpoint. No wonder they fail. British advocates of reform of the CAP and French opponents of reform (or, to put it the other way round, French defenders of rural culture and society and British advocates of market forces) never meet. The British debate among themselves in the UK, the French in France. It falls to national ministers alone to conduct the European debate about the future of the CAP, and they do so in private with many other issues of bilateral relations on the table at the same time.

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An open, parliamentary debate about the future of agriculture in Europe is long overdue. The present institutional set-up is not going to give us one: federalist proposals for parliamentary co-decision on all legislation and the budget would do so.

Lastly, let us look at the biggest and perhaps most important issue of all,



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the need for a full-time president of the European Union. The British government argues that such a person would give the EU a more coherent and effective voice in the world. I agree. Where we part company is on who this person should be.

Some people favour the idea that the European Council should elect itself a permanent chair to fill this role. This is madness.

First, there already is a president of the European Commission. That person is a full-time president who leads the EU's political executive, including on issues such as external trade, aid and development policy. The external role of a chair of the European Council would necessarily either be very limited or would start to cut across the present responsibilities of the Commission. The president of the European Commission would be the more effective leader.

Secondly, the president of the Commission is accountable before the European Parliament. Federalists would actually go further than this and give the European Parliament the right to elect the president of the

Commission as a result of the European elections. A chair of the European Council would be chosen by and accountable to the European Council alone. Of course, this body meets in private. The idea that this is preferable to the accountability of the Commission president before public sessions of the European Parliament is absurd. Whatever the European Union needs right now, it is not more secret meetings.

The president of the European Commission would not only be more effective but also more accountable. Maybe this is what some of the heads of government are afraid of.

I think it is significant that this idea has only caught the support of the heads of government of the larger member states: the smaller member states oppose it. They can see what kind of shift in power this would represent.

And no-one with democracy at heart should support it, either.

Peter Hain, British government representative on the Convention, has attempted to defend the proposal by explaining that a Council chair would "communicate a sense of purpose to

Europe's citizens." (2) A better model of politics, surely, is where the citizens communicate a sense of purpose to the elected political leadership.

While the immediate subject of debate in the Convention is the future shape of the European institutions, it is actually about something much broader than that. It is really a debate about the nature of democracy. Is political power to be exercised by elites, or is it to be exercised by citizens?

Getting this answer wrong is something we might regret for many years to come. Whatever else the Convention might decide, the role of parliaments in controlling executives – national and European – needs to be central.

(1) quoted in Ninth report from the European Committee of the Scottish Parliament, SP Paper 466

(2) Letter to Federal Union, 29 October 2002

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