

[Comment] Building European democracy

RICHARD LAMING

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - You can tell a lot about a political system from the buildings it erects to house its decision-makers. They provide a literally concrete expression of the collective self-image of the politicians inside.

For example, the British House of Commons meets in a 19th century mock gothic palace that only recently gave each MP an office and still can't fit all of them in the chamber at the same time. It is hopelessly inadequate for a modern democracy.

On the other hand, the US Congress meets in a grand neo-classical edifice with obvious allusion to the splendours of ancient Greece and Rome. It aches to be seen as the embodiment of a new era of democracy.

And in Brussels, the plans published last week for the new Council of Ministers building in the Residence Palace tell their own story about the EU.

First of all, there is the fact that a new building is needed at all. The EU has grown from 15 member states to 27 in the years since the old Justus Lipsius building was opened, and the Council of Ministers, which represents the member states, is the institution whose workload will grow the most as enlargement proceeds.

Secondly, there are the complaints about the cost. British eurosceptic newspapers have objected to the €315 million that is scheduled to be spent on the new building. That sounds like a lot of money, to be sure, but there are 500 million citizens in the EU to share the cost between us, and in fact it is less than what Europeans between them spend on wine or cigarettes in a single day. Put into context, it is not expensive.

Thirdly, there is the way the building reflects our political times. Much emphasis has been put in the design, and in the PR, about the ecological considerations that have



The council of ministers building should be open for business in 2013 (Photo: Council of European Union)

been incorporated: the building will generate some of its own electricity through solar panels on the roof and it will recycle all the rain water.

But my fourth point is about what goes on inside the building, not merely what it is made of. For here, the Council of Ministers is yet to live up to citizens' expectations.

Compare it with the European Parliament, where individuals can come to meet their MEPs and observe the meetings as they take place. The seats for visitors in the meeting rooms are often full with crowds spilling out into the corridors even at the most controversial and high-profile occasions. Law-making takes place in the public eye.

In the Council, however, there is no such public sphere. Access to the building is entirely at the discretion of the national governments, and there is no general right to see what goes on inside. This is not only true of the meetings, it is even true of the paperwork. Unlike in the parliament, you do not find detailed Council agendas and working papers published on the internet. The Council is still closed.

The Lisbon Treaty will change this a little, promising: "The Council shall meet in public when it deliberates and votes on a draft legislative act." So that is a good reason for the Irish to vote Yes next month. But there is more to it than that. It is not just the final stage in the legislative procedure that should be open, but every stage, just as it is in the parliament.

Members of the Council of Ministers have to change their mindset. The Council should increasingly act less like an inter-departmental committee of the kind they are used to in their own governments, and more like a legislative assembly of the kind in which most of them started their political careers. There should be proposals, speeches, amendments, and votes in place of the cosy consensus we are currently offered.

All I am asking is that the citizens of the EU should know properly what is being done in their name, with their money. And how can national parliaments properly engage in the European process if they cannot see how their national representatives are acting? Scrutiny depends on information, and information depends on openness.

Let us hope that, in 2013, when the new Residence Palace building is finally opened, the legislative work of the Council of Ministers will be finally opened too.

The writer is a commentator on European affairs, based in London, and a member of the board of Federal Union

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