



[salt&pepper] Parliament First - a lesson for Europe

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EUOBSERVER / SALT&PEPPER - A new pressure group launched last week in London raises lots of important questions about the future of democracy, both in the UK and across Europe. Parliament First has been set up by a group of MPs to campaign for the rights of members of the House of Commons.

The MPs are concerned about the growing power of the executive as compared with the legislature, attributing this in part to the increasing role of the media and NGOs. The fact that the MPs have to set up a pressure group to advance their campaign says on its own quite a lot about the declining importance of parliament.

Parliament First's case is based specifically on the need for reform in Westminster, but there are echoes of their proposals in the debate about the future of Europe. The same issues are being dealt with by the Constitutional Convention too.

The heart of the problem is that government ministers are no longer under any meaningful control from elected parliamentarians. The executive sets the parliamentary agenda, it controls the way it is itself scrutinised. The increasing separation between elected politicians and the actions of the government undermines public confidence in the political process altogether. Turnout in the 2001 general election was 17 per cent down on 1997. Something has to be done.

Let me suggest that Europe needs its own Parliament First movement, too. No, let's call it Parliaments First - the plural matters. For national parliaments need to be given greater influence over European decision-making, in addition to that exercised by the European Parliament in Brussels itself.

The heart of the problem in Brussels is the same as it is in Westminster. It is the unaccountable exercise of power by national governments.

The EU in its early days was a diplomatic club, representatives of the national governments meeting together in secret to take most of the decisions. As time has passed, successive treaties have increased the influence of the directly-elected European Parliament in the decision-making process. Democracy is taking over from diplomacy.

But this process is still not complete. The Council is not yet accountable enough as a decision-making body.

Demands that the Council should meet in public and publish its documents are only half the story. Sometimes there are not proper meetings, sometimes there are not proper documents. I have often been told to wait for the results of a Council meeting while the minutes are written. This is absurd. No-one would be happy if we had to wait several days before it was clear what the outcome of a vote in the European Parliament was.

At other times, the Council meets merely to rubber-stamp decisions already effectively taken elsewhere. The Council acts like a committee: it ought to be more like an assembly.

French MEP Alain Lamassoure has observed that national ministers like their current working 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." That is exactly why they should change.

Parliament First, in criticising the arrangements for parliamentary scrutiny in the UK, observes that "It is hard to think of other instances where the scrutineer controls the modus operandi of [the] scrutineer." They should come to Brussels.

I remember presenting myself at the entrance to the Justus Lipsius Council building in Brussels shortly after it opened in 1995 and asking for the public gallery. After meeting some blank and puzzled looks from the security guards, I was directed out of the gate and down the road to an office where I could pick up some leaflets. There should be more to accountability to the citizen than just a leaflet.

The reason why this matters, of course, is that many decisions that were formerly taken in the national capitals are now taken in Brussels. The single market, environmental policy, workplace issues: many of these things are shared by the member states rather than handled separately. But the fact that these decisions are now in the hands of the EU does not mean that national parliaments should accept their loss of influence.

Reforms to strengthen parliamentary democracy at both national and European level are on the table in the Convention. Real improvements in Brussels will enable national parliaments to reclaim their rightful role in holding their respective national governments to account. That is the way to reconnect the public with the political process.

The campaign may be called Parliament First, but the overall objective must be to put the citizens first.

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