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EC

Half-time in the European Parliament – Expectations, Reality, Outlook

by Rudolf Hrbek, Tübingen*

The European Parliament was set up by direct elections in June 1979. Great expectations had been placed in these direct elections with regard to the further development of the European Community. Now, half-way through the Parliament's five-year term, a certain Euro-weariness is gaining ground. Had expectations been pitched too high? How is the work of the European Parliament so far to be assessed? What are the prospects for the future?

Very great expectations had been placed by many quarters in the first direct European elections in 1979 and in the work of a directly elected European Parliament. These sprang from a critical assessment of the then state of the European Community and the prospects of its further development. This assessment covered the following points:

- the EC was dominated by bureaucrats and technocrats;
- decisions were made at a great remove from those affected by them and without adequate consideration for their own concerns;
- pressing problems confronting the member states were not being tackled or solved, or else the solutions consisted of exceedingly costly package deals (on the principle that "there ought to be something in it for everybody"). This particular charge was directed against the governments which guided the destinies of the Community.

In short, the Community's legitimacy gap was explained by its inadequate ability to solve problems and by its insufficiently democratic decision-making system. Many people, therefore, expected that a directly elected European Parliament would provide a remedy; their expectations were based on a number of factors:

- An increased number of Members (410 instead of 198), with a mandate from the electors, free from the fatiguing burden of a dual mandate, with the ambition to prove their worth in order to be re-elected in due course, and supported by the party organisations which

nominated them – such Euro-MPs might be able to make better use of the powers – formal and political – of Parliament.

- A Parliament thus constituted would operate more efficiently, it would make more effective use of typically parliamentary functions, it would provide impulses for the development of the Community, it would push hesitant governments into productive decisions and thereby gain public support and approval for Community policy.

Half-way through the first five-year term it should be possible to strike a preliminary balance. We have to ask ourselves, therefore, how the European Parliament (EP) has developed and whether the expectations placed in it have been fulfilled. Such a balance-sheet requires, primarily, the taking into account of the conditions which form the framework for the activity of the EP – especially as such a clarification might well reveal that expectations were pitched far too high or that they were directed towards "wrong" objectives.

Any assessment of the EP must proceed from the fact that it differs fundamentally, in a number of respects, from national parliaments:

- The EP is not part of a decision-making apparatus as in a parliamentary system of government where a majority supports the government (at least as a rule) and a minority forms the parliamentary opposition – in other words, where the government emerges from parliament, is linked to parliament and dependent on it, and where elections determine the relative strength of political forces decisive for the formation of government. In the decision-making apparatus of the EC the

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dominant role is played – in the shape of the Council of Ministers and the European Council – by the national governments, each of them embedded in the interplay of national forces and interests instead of being oriented towards the EP. The legislative body of the Community is the Council; the EP has no formal means of determining its activities. It does have such rights of supervision and control vis-à-vis the Commission as acceptance and discussion of the Annual Report, or a vote of no confidence, as well as a variety of possibilities for putting questions to the Commission which, though it submits proposals, cannot itself take decisions on them. An elector dissatisfied with EC policy could not express his criticism by voting in favour of an alternative government which might manage better. Instead he was asked by the political parties to give them support for their activity in the field of the EC, as well; thus the direct elections have frequently been turned into instruments serving domestic political issues, with European policy being somewhat relegated to the background.

□ The formal powers of the EP in the Community's decision-making procedure are – except in budgetary matters – confined to consultation: the EP comments on Commission proposals before the Council takes a decision – or, as happens frequently, takes no decision. The substance of such proposals tends to be highly specialised, which means it is totally unsuitable to lively or controversial parliamentary debate. Direct election has not entailed any widening of powers.

□ The Strasbourg Assembly also differs fundamentally from national parliaments in its composition. Its Members come from nine (since the accession of Greece 10) countries; they thus represent not only nationally moulded and accordingly differentiated interests but they also stem from diverse political cultures, a circumstance which also colours concepts of the role and function of a parliament. This national multiplicity is even surpassed by political multiplicity: the Members of the EP come from altogether more than 50 national political parties. Although transnational party federations of Christian Democrats, Liberals and Socialists have been established, these party federations are still insufficiently consolidated in terms of both organisation and political programme to provide the Euro-MPs with a firm and solid basis. Ultimately they are responsible solely to their national party organisations.

□ National multiplicity brings with it a multiplicity of languages. This gives rise to considerable communication problems, not only for the Members themselves but also for the parliamentary administration and the media. Above all, the direct

contact between Members is rendered difficult by language barriers. Considering the great heterogeneity which marks the EP this factor represents a far more serious impediment than the geographical split into three places of work – Strasbourg (plenary sessions), Luxembourg (administration of the EP and plenary sessions) and Brussels (committee and party meetings). A final decision on where the Assembly will sit is still being awaited; this decision is in the hands not of the EP itself but of the national governments.

Political Functions

Any half-time balance sheet of the EP has to be aware of the above-listed factors which circumscribe the framework for its activity. It is bound to be negative if the observer focuses on the formal powers of the EP only. As mentioned above, there has been no change in the scope of these powers; such a change would require an amendment of the Treaty, subject to ratification at national level, and consensus on this cannot at present be expected among the 10 member states. An assessment must therefore be based on the performance of the political functions of the EP – within the limits of its actual powers – and in this respect the Strasbourg Assembly can boast quite a few achievements.

Top place, also in terms of importance, is held here by the process of internal integration within the Parliament, an integration which is taking place mainly within the framework of the multinationally composed political groupings. Although the Members within a grouping regard themselves as belonging to the same political family, the views and attitudes of their respective national parties reveal such a broad spectrum that they frequently have considerable trouble achieving a common stand. But on the way to that common stand they each come to know and understand their colleagues better – even if some of these colleagues (or comrades) at times are regarded as a pain in the neck.

If one understands by integration, which is the emergence and development of a regional community such as the EC, an inevitably slow and laborious process, then this implies the process of mutually getting to know the principal actors in integration politics. Bearing in mind the national, political and interest-related heterogeneity of the Euro-MPs, the measure of internal integration visibly achieved so far is – especially if we remember the language barriers – remarkable. As the Members take the experiences gained in the EP back home with them into their respective national party organisations this learning effect transcends political groupings and Parliament.

The multiplicity represented in the EP directs one's attention to another typical function of parliaments: to be a representative mirror of society. This is what a directly elected EP was expected to be; this was clear from the start when candidates were nominated and can now be fully confirmed after more than two years' work. This character of its composition makes the EP a representative forum for the articulation of the views and demands of wholly diverse and conflicting national, party-political and interest groups.

If one focuses on the EP's aspect as a forum then various peculiarities of its work fit this picture very well – such as the thirst for activity of numerous Euro-MPs, as reflected in a veritable flood of parliamentary questions and urgent motions. Or the lack of discipline within the political groupings: divergent or conflicting views are not simply swept under the carpet but are exposed to the public gaze. Such a lack of inhibition in self-revelation could scarcely be expected if the political groupings regarded themselves as playing the part of government and opposition, from whom closed ranks are invariably expected. This uninhibited behaviour of the actors in this forum is ultimately encouraged also by their lack of legislative power; if the EP had continuously to make legislative decisions this would undoubtedly result in changes affecting this sort of self-revelation.

Self-assured initiatives

Mention has already been made of the limited powers of the EP in Community legislation. It is interesting to see, therefore, how, given this background, the European Parliament attempts to exert political influence on legislation. A striking feature is the assurance with which Euro-MPs have tackled this task. They have taken up a multiplicity of problems with the parliamentary means at their disposal, i.e. by questions, by detailed examination in committees followed by reports, and finally by means of debates and resolutions in plenary session. This reflects the EP's claim to the launching of initiatives and the provision of impulses; these may be regarded as central parliamentary functions which do not require any formal legislative powers. In this connection the EP has discussed issues which do not strictly come within the Community competence set out in the Treaties – for instance in the field of foreign relations.

What some people welcome as an intensive exercise of initiative-creating functions is criticised by others as aimless activity. Aimless in the sense that no precise priorities can be discerned. Only well-considered initiatives concentrated upon a few important issues –

the critics maintain – can earn the EP respect in the long run in its dialogue with other Community institutions, and gain for the initiatives any realistic hope of success. Since the EP ultimately possesses no effective means of enforcing the implementation of its initiatives it should endeavour, by concentrating on fewer but important issues, to lend greater weight to these and thus ensure for them better chances of success. Pleas for such a concentration naturally come up against the lack of cohesion within the political groupings and also against the individual Member's attempts to be seen as the champion of his own constituency and its interests. The EP has tried to induce the Commission to adopt the positions of the EP but has not always succeeded in doing so. The Commission's autonomy and independence, laid down in the Treaty and proved useful in practice, would of course be impaired in consequence, and this would be seen as a disadvantage not only in Commission circles.

Understandable as the charge of excessively wide-ranging activity may be with regard to the multiplicity of questions and motions, this should not blind one to the fact that the EP has very purposefully used its powers in budgetary matters. Because of their complexity these were left to be discussed by a handful of experienced Euro-MPs – certainly an explanation for the purposefulness of the procedure – yet even these budget experts needed the support of their political groupings and indeed received it. The aim of the budget conflict with the Council was a regrouping of expenditure positions: in other words, the EP wanted to use the budget as an instrument for setting new priorities in Community policy. Roughly speaking, the issue was mainly a reform of the Common Agricultural Policy with the object of employing monies thus released in a meaningful and purposeful manner elsewhere.

An important parliamentary function is control – and here the EP can show a clear capture of new positions. These are not so much spectacular public actions – as the budget conflict had been – as a matter of discreet control practised in numerous institutionalised but also informal contacts between Euro-MPs and members of the Commission, and more recently also increasingly with representatives of the Council and the Presidency. Here the parliamentary committees are the main arenas, and it is the continuity of relations that intensifies the control effect.

In order to discharge its publicity function effectively, i.e. to project and explain its work to the public, the EP needs support: it depends on the media. The EP's now

almost routine complaints about the media are exaggerated and unfair. They deliberately overlook the fact that working conditions for journalists in Strasbourg are poor, that only a handful of them can afford a costly prolonged stay in Strasbourg (since many of them work permanently in Brussels) and that both the often highly specialised subject-matter and the still very inadequate organisation of parliamentary work (interesting and important issues are discussed after editorial deadlines) all represent obstacles.

Communication, however, is not just a matter for the media alone; it is up to the Members and their party organisations. With few exceptions feedback between a Euro-MP and his base is inadequate. True, his "constituency" is too large for intensive nursing; nevertheless contacts could be closer and reciprocal communication more dense.

In a number of reports the EP has submitted various proposals on institutional and procedural matters, all of them designed to make the fullest possible use of potentialities provided by the Treaties. These concern the EP's relations with national parliaments, with the Council, with European Political Co-operation, with its role in legislation, in the investiture of the Commission and in the ratification of treaties with non-Community countries. Important as these initiatives are in the context of a long-term strategy by the EP to consolidate its position in the decision-making system of the Community, their rather dry or abstract subject-matter is scarcely apt to produce a positive public echo. As for the much more ambitious initiative associated with the name of Spinelli and the "Club Crocodile", aiming at an overall institutional reform this is likely, at a time of clearly increasing EC scepticism among the public, to be dismissed as unrealistic. Thus the survey data of the "Euro-barometer" in the summer of 1981 reflect an appreciable decline in the positive evaluation of membership in the EC (in the Federal Republic of Germany the figures, for the first time, dropped below the 50 % mark to 49 %, as against 62 % in October 1980) and simultaneously an increase in negative evaluation (in the Federal Republic of Germany to 9 % as against a mere 6 % in October 1980).

Further Development of the Constitution

If the EP is credited with the functions of a constitution-developing institution this should not be understood in terms of formulating general drafts or indeed formal constitutional texts but rather as a step-by-step "enrichment" of the Community's present situation with regard to its decision-making system and functional scope. Under this heading come the

development of a list of basic human rights (or of elements for such a list), the laying down of certain procedural practices in line with the EP reports mentioned, and also the improvement of regional policy via Regional Funds.

One is struck by the attention which the EP commands among non-Community states and their political forces. This interest is satisfied by the EP by, among other things, extensive travel by EP delegations throughout the world. Is it really quite fair to regard these journeys merely as unnecessary political tourism by Euro-MPs taking themselves too seriously?

The everyday picture of parliamentary work is dominated not by the great names but by those experienced parliamentary veterans and those young politicians who totally identify with their new task. An important part is also played by Euro-MPs who are, simultaneously, high-ranking representatives of important organised interest groups.

Some people have forecast a confrontation between a bourgeois and a socialist/communist bloc (or Lager); although this cleavage emerged in a few instances, it does not seem to be the dominant feature of the EP's political structure. On the contrary, the important issues have shown up alignments between supporters and opponents of a continuous further development of the integration process.

Thankless Situation

This balance sheet would be incomplete if it did not also contain a brief glance forward towards the end of the "second half". At its end stand the second direct elections, and it would be wise to start thinking about them now and to reflect on what can be shown to the electorate after the promises made and the promissory notes issued in 1979. The political parties which will have to render account and again solicit support for their candidates and their policies will have to account for themselves. The EP and its Members will find themselves in the strange and thankless position of being held responsible and having to answer for matters for which they are not responsible – i.e. the situation of the EC at the time. No matter how slight the influence which the EP has had upon this, the voters might well register their disappointment by refraining from voting. Certainly the EP would have deserved better than that. But it will have quite a job presenting to the general public a convincing parliamentary balance sheet, one that will impress the public more than will the general situation of the Community for which the EP is not responsible.