

'The European Parliament and European integration as seen by an Englishman' from 30 jours d'Europe (January 1977)

Caption: In the January 1977 edition of the monthly publication 30 jours d'Europe, Lord Frederick Bessborough, Conservative MEP, gives his point of view on the role of the European Parliament in European integration.

Source: 30 jours d'Europe. dir. de publ. FONTAINE, François ; Réd. Chef CHASTENET, Antoine. Janvier 1977, n° 222. Paris: Service d'information des Communautés européennes. "Le Parlement européen et la construction européenne vus par un Anglais", auteur:Lord Bessborough , p. 8.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_european_parliament_and_european_integration_as_seen_by_an_englishman_from_30_jours_d_europe_january_1977-en-53256ee8-1fed-4fa3-a905-53d1706e1026.html



Last updated: 06/07/2016

The European Parliament and European integration as seen by an Englishman

Lord Bessborough

Member of the European Parliament

During a recent trip to Washington, many of my friends asked me how I saw the evolution of the European Community in general and the European Parliament in particular. Are we moving towards something like the United States of Europe? Will the European Parliament become a kind of House of Representatives? After serious thought, I still have trouble giving precise answers to these questions.

Many Europeans seem to be impatient with the slow pace of European integration. However, a historic movement on this scale must be viewed with as great a sense of perspective as possible. Let us not forget that, barely a generation ago, the members of the Community were still fighting each other in Europe. Now war has become unthinkable.

European integration is a very complex process, and there are few precedents in the history books. Even though the difficulties encountered during the founding and development of the USA were comparatively minor, in America things often took a long time to develop. It took two and a half years for the 13 States to ratify the Constitution, and it was not until 1850 that America had a real currency, in silver coins! Likewise, a close look at the entire American Constitution shows that it consists of an amalgamation of proposals submitted over a relatively lengthy period of time.

Personally, I think that progress in European integration will inevitably be slow because of the immense difficulties that it must encounter. It is extremely difficult to reconcile the different characteristics, traditions and aspirations of each participating country with the existence of institutions created out of a movement for international cooperation unprecedented in Europe.

In the past, European nations came together only after conquests or because of problems of heredity or in order to wage war or defend themselves. It was the threat of a Turkish invasion from the East that, for a long while, ensured the cohesion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Once that threat disappeared, the Empire started to disintegrate, largely because of the lack of a federal structure that might have allowed the Hungarians, Poles, Romanians, Slovenians and others to satisfy their desire for independence, after so many years under the central control of Vienna. By contrast, the origins of the European Community lie not in conflict but in the understanding that the best way to ensure the well-being of Europeans is a close association of countries cooperating for peaceful purposes.

The latest challenge with which the Community has had to cope has been the energy crisis. If men and governments do not have confidence in the Community institutions, there are temptations for nations to find their own solutions, and the challenge becomes a divisive factor. This confidence is of fundamental importance to Europe, because it brings with it a feeling that the individual belongs to a whole. While everyone feels less European than French, German or Irish (or even Corsican, Bavarian or a Dubliner) a united Europe will be no more than a politico-institutional phenomenon, with no international impact. To feel European, everyone, man or woman, must not only be able to be proud of the Community and its achievements but also believe that they may have contributed to it in some way.

The requisite democratic control

For these reasons, it is very important that the European institutions operate smoothly, and it is vital to add a directly elected European Parliament as soon as possible. The reasoning behind this is simple and irrefutable. If one admits that isolated action by one national government on its own cannot solve a growing number of problems, then the European institutions must be subject to the kind of control to which we have become accustomed in a democratic system, and a Community Parliament must be established.

Some people say that we are thereby merely creating another level of decision-making, in other words an

extra bureaucracy. To them one may reply that supranational power, in the form of multinational undertakings, international agencies or groups of nations such as OPEC, is a reality and that it necessitates the creation of democratic supranational institutions.

It is not a foregone conclusion that the European Parliament, once elected by direct universal suffrage, will become a kind of House of Representatives, with the Council of Ministers of the Community playing the role of Senate or House of the States. This would need profound changes to the Treaties. However, as Chairman of the European Parliament working party responsible for reviewing the role, status and working conditions of directly elected Members, I may say that a European Parliament, anxious to play its full role in the creation of a united Europe, must be able to interest people in its work, which in turn will foster better understanding. At the same time, it must take more resolute action than we may expect today from the Council of Ministers of the Community.

We need men of the calibre of Churchill, Schuman, Monnet, Spaak or De Gasperi, to name but a few. Whoever they are, these leaders must perform miracles if Europe is to hold its own in the world.

If we consider the process of European integration in its historical context, it is completely unrealistic to think that it can make rapid progress, especially since no single sector can progress alone, with difficulties in one area making it impossible to move forward in another. The European Community must evolve slowly, think out carefully the future of its institutions and learn lessons from the past. It must demonstrate patience, determination and self-confidence. Above all, it needs time to overcome its differences, establish procedures, and mobilise and direct the talents and energy of its peoples.

Lord Bessborough