

Speech by Peter Kirk to the European Parliament (16 January 1973)

Caption: In a speech to the European Parliamentary Assembly on 16 January 1973, British Conservative MP Peter Kirk presents a memorandum comprising a number of proposals aimed at improving the operation of the Assembly.

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It is with a great sense of pride that I speak today as the first citizen of my country ever to address this Parliament as a member. My own feelings are necessarily those of profound emotion, for it was the European cause more than any other which has influenced me throughout 18 years of British parliamentary life, nearly half of them spent in our sister assemblies, the Council of Europe and Western European Union.

To me the realisation of Europe has always been a necessity for my country, for Europe and for the world. It is, therefore, a matter of great excitement that I should have been asked to lead the members of my party here in this Parliament and make what contribution I can to the great work which we have to do.

I must warn you, however, Mr President, that not all my colleagues in the British Conservative delegation share to the full the enthusiasm which I have just expressed for this work. We have thought it right, in submitting the names which both houses of our Parliament have unanimously approved, to produce a team which is as representative as possible, and we have given due weight, therefore, not only to the various regions of our country but also to those sections of opinion in the party who have yet to be convinced of the wisdom of the step which we have taken or, indeed, who are flatly opposed to it, at least in its present form.

That the British team is not even more fully representative is something which I naturally regret, though there is not very much that I or any other Conservative can do about it. I do not think it is a gap which will remain unfilled for very long; but until it is filled, I fear that quite a large section of British opinion will remain unrepresented in this Parliament.

That is itself a pity, for the decisions we shall take here in the immediate future are ones which will affect to the full the daily lives of every one of the 50 million citizens of our islands. As the legislation flows out from the Commission, not only in its normal course of business but in pursuance of the decisions taken at the Summit Conference last October, the shape of our Community for the next ten years at least will begin to form and it is vital that the voice of all our peoples, through their representatives here, should be fully heard.

We shall have much to say, particularly on such matters as the Common Agricultural Policy - which still, rightly or wrongly, causes much concern in my country - the proposed regional policy from which so many of our people have great expectations, and the monetary and economic policy which, if it is successful, cannot fail to transform our own economic position in the world even more drastically than the Community in its present form.

We shall have much to say, too, about the workings of the Parliament, for the health of this Parliament is essential to the health of the Community as a whole. The Community cannot function unless it has a base in the hearts and minds of the peoples, and Parliament is the only body which can provide that base. Without an effective Parliament our Community is in danger of strangling in bureaucracy or drowning in apathy.

Parliament must be made to work for the good not only of ourselves but of the two other institutions as well, for if one part of the body is sick it is bound to infect the whole.

We have thought long and hard about this, and we realise the inevitable tendency of new members to try to change everything to their own liking. That we must resist.

Our Parliament, if it is to have true life, will acquire its own procedures based, we hope, on the best that each of our nine constituent Parliaments can provide. Insofar as we can contribute to that task we shall do so. It may well be that there are methods and procedures in use at Westminster which will be highly relevant and useful here. To that end we have drawn up a memorandum, attached to a draft resolution, which I have today tabled on behalf of the Conservative group.

We believe from the study we have been able to make that this Parliament should seize the opportunity created by enlargement to take a thorough but quick look at itself and its relations to the other institutions. We have therefore proposed that a special committee of 13 members should be constituted, charged with

this investigation. It would be able to hear evidence from anyone it likes, members of national Parliaments as well as this one, parliamentary officers, academics and the journalists who report our proceedings. It should report back with the minimum of delay, and its report should then be subjected to the fullest scrutiny and debate by us before the changes are made. Only in this way, we believe, shall we get the type of broad perspective which is so essential. But procedural reform, important though it is, is not, and must not be, an end in itself. It can be a real snare, giving the illusion of action without the reality. We also wish to press ahead with those things which Parliament can do now without any changes in the Treaty.

The more we have examined the situation the more astonished we are at the latent power which this Parliament could have if only it would use it. We hope to play our part in this, through things like questions, budgetary control and other measures some of which we have indicated in the document to which I have referred.

We have given many examples of how we can assume power even if it is not explicit in the Treaty. We take as our motto "Silence gives consent" and that we are entitled to do anything which is not expressly prohibited. Let us do that in every area that we can find it. The power we have may be a negative one. This has always been so in the formative years of parliaments. But it is a real power just the same, and it is there for the taking.

If anyone says, "You have not been given the right of initiative", the answer is simple and clear. Initiatives are not there to be given; they are there to be seized. We can, and must, seize them.

It is in this spirit that we shall act and it is for this that we have come. Our policy is a simple one - power to the Parliament. Our rules must be shaped with that and that alone in mind. There must be power over the Commission first because that is implied in the Treaty. But we must examine our relations with the Council as well. Here we shall need to proceed in closest cooperation with our national Parliaments. The close accord between us here and those remaining in Parliaments at home is something which needs to be developed with the utmost urgency. By this means this Parliament will live and the peoples will clamour to be directly represented in it.

May I end, as I began, on a personal note. As I have said, this day is for me the culmination of all of my political life. A quarter of a century ago, as a young student, I observed the great congress at The Hague from which all this sprang. It was the dead who called us then - the dead of countless battlefields through the ages and particularly those of the two suicidal civil wars which Europe has fought in this century.

They call us still. The voice may be fainter now, the call obscured by the bureaucracy, power politics, the sheer frustration which has intervened since that time. But the call is still there, and it is for us even more than for the other institutions of the Community.

What we then set out to do was penance for their death by the creation of a system which would make such madness impossible ever again, a system which would be for us, the Europeans, but which we hoped would be an inspiration for the world. Despite all of the detours which have taken place, that is still our goal and it is only in and through this Parliament that it can be achieved. This is because it is this Parliament which gives the Community its uniqueness in the world. There is not, there never has been, anything like it. It stands for free discussion and solution by consent, for the willingness of the minority to bow to the will of the majority and of the majority to allow the minority to be heard to the fullest possible extent.

Only in this way can our problems be solved. Only in this way can the world's problems be solved. In this sense, frail and frustrated though it may appear to be this Parliament remains the last best hope of mankind.