

'The Spierenburg Report: (2) To each his role!' from Europe

Caption: In his editorial of 5 October 1979, Emanuele Gazzo, Editor-in-chief of Agence Europe, summarises the main proposals contained in the Spierenburg Report relating, in particular, to the operation of the European Commission and the internal reorganisation of its services.

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The Spierenburg Report (2) To each his role

As we said yesterday, the reforms proposed by the Spierenburg group, though essentially concerned with "good business management", nevertheless have a definite political import, as well as human implications which are not to be underestimated. The proposals do not call for any changes to the Treaties, although on some points there would have to be agreements between the Governments. Only the Commission is directly concerned although neither its powers nor its relations with other Community institutions would be affected. What they would do would be to enable the Commission to carry out its functions and exercise its powers more fully, in the interests of the Community as a whole.

Further proposals are likely to come from the group of wise men led by Robert Marjolin. They will be dealing with Community institutions as a whole and there is likely to be a good deal of common ground between these and the Spierenburg proposals (and in fact the two groups have already met.)

In the part of the Spierenburg Report which deals with the present situation and the roots of existing disorders, the authors present a lucid and objective - and bold - diagnosis. The defects in the way the departments work are not the work of chance but stem first and foremost from external political factors (the tendency to try to limit the independence and right of initiative of the Commission; the number of Commissioners and the way they are appointed; inadequate contact with the outside world; procedures for allocating official posts, etc.). On top of this, there is also the gradual expansion of the work load (and the geographical size of the Community) into unforeseen areas, which through successive generations of Presidents has often led to conflicting decisions and measures which have been difficult to implement.

Lack of space prevents us from giving a summary of the Report which is worth reading in full. We will confine ourselves to picking out the main points:

(1) The most important point is the proposal to limit the number of Commissioners to one per country. If the governments agree, this could be done as of January 1981 (new Commission, which will include Greece). The idea was discussed at length (see chapter on the institutions in the Enlargement Committee's report) and received a varying response. The plan to have only one commissioner per country is a logically sound one, since within the Commission, the idea of each country being duly represented does not exist. The commissioners are independent and are appointed by common agreement of all the national government. The idea of "weighting" is out of place here, since each commissioner is concerned with the general interests of the Community as a whole. Some believe it is right, and even necessary to achieve a fair balance of political forces. But this is a closed door for the smaller countries. Such a balance can only be achieved in general terms. Others believe that a Commission with one commissioner for each nationality would lead to a dangerous symmetry with the Committee of Permanent Representatives. But the Commission is a political-level organisation, whilst the Committee of Permanent Representatives is an essentially diplomatic body. We would also point out that as far back as 1965 and 1967 we warned against too large a Commission.

(2) The second major proposal is to strengthen the part played by the presidency (just as the practice for designating the President adopted in 1977), by having only one vice-president who would perform a coordinating function which would help to strengthen the collegiate nature of the presidency. Provided the necessary vertical and horizontal contact and controls could be ensured, this would constitute an effective improvement.

(3) From this point of view, the reforms suggested for rationalising the Directorates-General and the departments would be quite substantial. Every aspect of the role of the Director General would be reviewed. The role of cabinet heads would be involved here. The criticisms made in the report are not without foundation. No personal criticism is levelled against individual members - although the Report does suggest limits to the role of cabinets or private offices - but some aspects of the way in which the cabinets operate are starting to cause difficulties (cabinet interference in certain procedures which tends to disrupt the Commission members in carrying out their collegiate tasks).

(4) The Report then goes on to make a series of detailed proposals relating the use of staff resources.

Nothing could be more fallacious than the image of the Commission as an anti-hill teaming "stateless" technocrats producing reams and reams of documents. From the point of view of mobility and career freedom, things are in excellent shape. But a real spirit of participation has yet to be achieved. A Commission based on sound structures with a strong sense of purpose would kindle the spirit and turn so many more or less frustrated officials into a veritable army marching under the banner they have chosen to serve.

Em. G