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"Perspectives for the European Union and the Role of European Parties for the Development of an European Democracy"

by Sir Graham Watson MEP

Lieber Wolfgang Schussel, sehr geehrte Damen unde Herren, dear fellow torch carriers for the spirit of international understanding,

Zunaechst, entschuldigen Sie mich wenn ich heute meine Muttersprache, englisch, verwende, eher als die weitverbreiteste Muttersprache unserer europaischen Union, Deutsch. Es gelingt mir vielleicht ihre Fragen nachher auf Deutsch zu beantworten. Die Deutsche ist wie meine Frau - ich liebe sie, aber ich beherrsche sie nicht.

Thank you for inviting me to address you in such a prestigious building. It is an honour which I suspect would not have been accorded to a Liberal in times past.

I welcome the occasion, as President of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party, to put on record the admiration felt by Liberals across our continent for Austria's generous and consistent contribution to UN peacekeeping missions.

I come however not only as a Liberal Democrat but also - coming from Scotland - as a fellow Celt. My ancestors probably come from somewhere between Vienna and Brno, before the movement of Europe's tribes subsided, from the area which we then called *Norig*, which means Oesterreich.

Today Europe's people live peaceful, sedentary, longer and more enjoyable lives. But are we happy? I detect a malaise which may have something to do with Europe being at a critical turning point in its history.

Indeed, Konrad Adenauer would have said, "The situation is serious but not hopeless".

Oder wie ein österreichisches Sprichwort besagt: „Ist der Berg auch noch so steil, a bisserl was geht allerweil.“

So please allow me to share with you some ideas about how I think we can use this challenge in a positive manner and about the role European political parties can play in this context.

Though the EU is under attack from some political forces in almost every member state, I don't need to remind this esteemed audience of the rationale for our European project. Centuries of conflict, culminating in a rage of self-mutilation from Sarajevo in 1914 to Sarajevo in 1994, have given way to cooperation. The EU is a laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize.

The account of how this was achieved is nowadays met mostly with indifference and apathy. The role of ideology and political parties overlooked. If history tends to repeat itself it is partly because few ever listen. Which is why the task of all European Democrats today must be to prevent the conditions arising in which we might see a return to Europe's era of warring states.

A major criticism of the European Union today is that it is an elitist project. Of course it started as an elite project, as did the Hapsburg empire or any other government in history. The founders of the first supranational institutions knew that nationalism and prejudice would only be overcome by economic interdependence. In their day the idea of supra-national policies and pooling of political sovereignty would never have got majority backing, even among French and German citizens.

The challenge today is to show people how much of a universal and popular project Europe has become, and to insist that sharing sovereignty means regaining rather than losing sovereignty.

PAN EUROPEAN PARTIES

As President of the European Liberal Democrats, the ALDE Party, one of my driving convictions is that European political parties can play an important role in educating the people and in overcoming such fears. And I pay tribute here to the role of our host Wolfgang Schuessel, who used Austria's 2006 Presidency of the EU to host a major conference on Communicating Europe in Salzburg and to co-host in Brussels a meeting of all Europe's parliaments to the same end. Under Wolfgang's presidency, the EP debated the role and power of political parties in this regard.

Of course, political parties are less fashionable than in the days when the choices seemed clearer. Partly this is the fault of individuals: irresponsible behaviour and criminal abuse of taxpayers' money within political parties across the spectrum and across the EU have damaged citizens' trust in parties. Partly it is the globalisation of information and the power which flows from it. But whatever the faults and limitations of democratic party politics, its genius is that parties and politicians reflect and mirror the society from which they emanate.

Political parties form the transmission belt between society and the state. They organise and structure political dialogue in a society. They strengthen democracy when they present choices at elections and seek to mobilize citizens behind their visions.

Political parties are the heart and soul of European democracies.

Naturally, citizens are mostly interested in what happens locally, i.e. what directly and visibly concerns and affects them in their daily lives. Responsible political parties place these concerns in a national context. Thus they help find common ground and provide a platform for public policy proposals which are shaped by citizens' preferences.

The responsibility placed on political parties is great, and their representatives must ensure that the party system is deeply and durably entrenched in the fabric of society. If public confidence in political parties is compromised, the entire democratic process suffers.

The success of Europe as a political project will also be based on a functioning efficient democratic system in which its citizens are fully engaged. This requires political parties operating on a continental scale.

We have reached a stage in European integration where it is no longer sufficient for political parties to fulfill these functions uniquely in a national context. Even without the EU, the challenges of globalization require global political responses, which is why I favour a parliamentary assembly for the United Nations.

Successive EU Treaties have recognized the importance of European parties for successful European integration. In 2003, a European political party statute was adopted by the EU and in 2007 a statute for political foundations. But the parties still fall short in playing their full and vital role as a link between the EU political institutions and public opinion and discussions with Commission and Council about how to remedy this are still ongoing.

If by the term 'political party' we mean democratic organisations of members, coming together on the basis of political affinity, drawing up programs, selecting candidates for office, fighting elections, and ensuring that elected representatives uphold their commitments, then European Political Parties still have a long way to go.

SITUATION AND SUGGESTIONS

The Lisbon Treaty has strengthened the role of the European Parliament but at the same time – rather accidentally, but to the satisfaction of national governments – weakened the role of the European Commission and significantly elevated the role of the European Council.

The European Parliament still suffers most from the lack of a uniform electoral system. European elections consist not of one election held simultaneously across our continent to one parliament, but of 27 different national elections on the same weekend. National parties select candidates for election to a supranational body whose full parliamentary rights are denied by the member states.

The EU and its institutions have lost public support over the thirty-four years since the first direct elections to our Strasbourg Parliament. The unspecific fear of loss of national identity is one reason for this, but it is not the only one. The tendency of national leaders to claim credit for all the EU's successes and to blame Brussels for all its failures is another. The plethora of “European Presidents” is anything but helpful.

In most democracies, a dialogue with citizens is conducted not exclusively, but first and foremost by political parties. They do this through campaigns, involving not just leadership based in capital cities but through party memberships throughout.

To play their role fully, to live up to the expectations placed upon them and to help the Union reconnect with its 500 million citizens, reform of the European parties is now essential.

The most frequent charge laid against the European Parliamentary elections is that they are not ‘about Europe’. Sadly, this is a fair criticism.

Big issues on the agenda of the EU institutions, like the election of the new Commission, the size of the new budget, or future enlargement are seldom presented in a way in which the voter could take a decisive choice between one option and another.

As we are advancing the European agenda and the supra-national decision making process doubtlessly becomes increasingly important, this dis-connect becomes counterproductive.

Voters have very little chance of learning about the importance or nature of the party political battles in Brussels and Strasbourg, so it is difficult to hold the performance of a sitting MEP to account at election time, and difficult to know how a vote can influence the shape of things to come at the EU level.

European Liberal Democrats want to make EU politics compatible with mass politics. We were the first European political party to form and we have pioneered and opened ALDE Party membership to individuals beyond the membership of national member parties.

Thus an Individual can become a member of European Liberal Democrats even if they are not member of a national ALDE member party. Allowing for individual members and in the long run their full participation in the internal decision-making process will ensure that we bring the European debate to the citizens.

The much needed European public sphere will be no divine gift, but we need to work for it. And if not political parties, who else can make a major contribution? European Liberal Democrats – just like the other major party families – intend to put forward a common candidate to become the next European Commission President. Political platforms are important but in the end you need a face to the campaign that citizens can identify with. Different candidates will embody different ideas, provide voters with a choice and personalise the campaign.

European political parties could thus ensure that politicians join the debate and don't abuse European elections to settle national scores.

We must not shy away from debate. We must re-instill confidence in the European project. But that requires honesty, and as Robert Menasse (author of the fervent novel “Der europäische Landbote”) recently said: “If politicians would join the public debate and say, “there are failures. We’re going to fix them so that you can enjoy the freedom of travel, the freedom of establishment, a collective currency and so on, then people would regain confidence.”

At EU level we need to create the policies that are needed in a world confronted with global challenges such as climate change, migration, internationally organised crime or appalling rates of youth unemployment.

Citizens need to feel that they can influence not just the pace of European integration, but also its content, and that they can do this through a recognizable democratic process. This implies the introduction of more political confrontation within the European institutions to enable citizens to determine political options and to participate in a debate.

The content of EU policy-making has evolved. Alongside the traditional debates about more or less Europe, more familiar controversies from a national point of view, such as the level of regulation of the market, the place of social issues, the mix of energy or green taxation, have emerged. I believe that we need this debate about what kind of Europe we want rather than debating more or less Europe. Citizens know instinctively that the EU is the right level at which to decide the big questions: in this they are ahead of the politicians.

But the nature of those questions has changed. The issues that national governments face today, such as rapid world population growth and migration, climate change and energy security, fighting international crime are supranational in their nature and so require supranational solutions.

The contours of the global economy are drawn not here in Europe but in the computer campuses of west coast America, in the call centres of India, in the factories of China and Brazil. We need not just a common market but common policies for the business success which drives jobs and lifts wages and living standards. Europe offers us the solidarity to face these together, but also the political space in which to decide how.

But that also means reforms. It means we need a European budget matching those challenges and not reflecting the EU of the six in the sixties. It means that we should not get lost in legislation on details better regulated at local and regional level. It means that Parliament must reform itself to stop the system of *Proporz* dominating our deliberations; and the Council must reform and organize itself as a debating chamber (a chamber of states) and not a body to defend vested national interests.

The EU has been a daring and – based on historic experiences – necessary project but we need to reform it and further develop it.

NEXT STEPS

It is high time to stimulate and propagate political debate within the EU, making it more transparent and familiar to European citizens. This implies injecting into the system some competitive elements characteristic of the national political process, which would help citizens to identify the major players and force these players to express their positions and respond to their opponents in the media. It would thereby help citizens to understand the possible consequences if one actor or the other succeeds in implementing her or his agenda. This is why we need common candidates at EU level and the election of at least some members of the European Parliament on transnational lists from an EU wide constituency.

The EU system is excessively geared towards consensus and often characterised by secrecy. Political alternatives should be made more visible and political parties are key actors in formulating these alternative policy frameworks.

European elections are the major moment when citizens can express a choice between European policy alternatives. Let us raise the stakes of these European elections by establishing a clearer link between parliament and executive – essentially by elaborating upon the mechanism that makes the choice of the President of the Commission dependent on the results of the elections. For this mechanism to work properly, the European political parties must be able to present their candidate and campaign around him or her.

The future of Europe as a political project depends on being able to mobilize European public opinion on European political issues. In this, I believe European political parties can make an essential contribution.

Lieber Wolfgang Schüssel,

On 20 June 2006 in the European Parliament you said “Die Ode an die Freude, die wir als Hymne haben, ist ja keine Ode an die Tristesse“. Let us take this as our motto and look forward with optimism to turning current challenges into future freedoms.

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