

ENLARGEMENT: A PARLIAMENTARY PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

Article for European Business Journal, 1997

The European Parliament plays a key role in the enlargement process. Its assent to enlargement is a Treaty requirement. Since 1989 it has been developing and strengthening its links with parliamentarians and governments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In the author's view, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Estonia (as well as Cyprus) are on the right track.

The fifth enlargement of the European Union suffers from superlatives. It is regularly described as historic. It involves the largest ever number of potential applicants. It is seen as the most difficult, the most diverse and the most expensive enlargement in the short history of European integration. The first four enlargements established expectations and practices about enlargement; questions are now being asked about whether this enlargement can be treated in the same way as its predecessors.

It is true that any enlargement happening this far into European integration is bound to be complicated, as applicant countries have more catching up to do and there are more vested interests in the current member states to be considered. This enlargement is also made difficult by the gross overcrowding of the European Union's agenda in the late 1990s. To attempt the reform of the Union's institutions concurrently with the expansion of NATO and the debate on the integration of the Western European Union into the Union would be difficult enough. To do so when most of Europe's political class is obsessed with the introduction of a single currency shows a confidence that verges on hubris.

In reality this enlargement is not as uniquely difficult as the headlines would indicate. All enlargements pose challenges, the difficulties of which are largely forgotten once the treaties are successfully ratified. The British were kept waiting for twelve years and the Spanish for eight. It is not unusual therefore that the extension of the Union to the new democracies of Central Europe is taking time. Given the scale of the challenge one can argue that progress, however frustratingly slow for the applicants, is in fact proceeding as rapidly as practical. A set of criteria relating to political reform, human rights and to the ability to compete economically in an enlarged community are supplementing the broad geo-political guidelines that rule any enlargement. Just as the Intergovernmental Conference has no chance of successfully completing its full agenda in one attempt, so the reality of enlargement is that it will proceed in one or more waves. Political and diplomatic obfuscation cloud the scene, but this reality is of a gradual but unstoppable process towards the reunification of Europe.

Parliamentarians play a key role in this panorama of change. The Treaty specifies the necessity for European Parliamentary Assent to enlargement, an Assent that must of course be mirrored by the parliamentarians of the applicant state and of the member states. The evolution of parliamentary links with Eastern and Central Europe since 1989 casts an informative light on the wider process.

Immediately after the revolutions of 1989 there was an understandable burst of excitement and euro-rhetoric of a 'Back to Europe' nature. Blinking in the light of the democratic miracle, the would-be parliamentarians of Eastern and Central Europe found themselves required not just to contemplate what had previously been unthinkable, but actually to participate in the construction of European Union. The winter of 1990 saw newly-free Europe dotted with seminars on the politics of the parliamentary system. Academics and political parties rushed into smoke-filled conferences to explain the detail and philosophy of modern Western European politics. Immediately it became apparent that in addition to creating or re-creating democratic institutions in their newly liberated countries the parliamentarians of the East would also have to master the complexity of the institutions of Europe. Throughout 1990 and 1991 a stream of parliamentarians from the East made visits to the corridors of Brussels and Strasbourg. They became regular habitués of international inter-party cooperation. Their personalities, experiences and political philosophies imprinted themselves on their Western European hosts. Such personal contacts gave flesh and bone to the geo-political imperative of Union enlargement.

The initial awe of such contacts, with their newness and excitement, has inevitably given way to the longer-term business of detailed planning and negotiation. The monumental ignorance of Western Europe and the naive assumptions of Eastern Europe have begun to be tempered by the reality of

dealing with the detail of enlargement and its attendant devils. The heroic amateurism of the early days of the PHARE programme has matured into something more useful. The Union, almost despite itself, has mapped out the path back to Europe. Jacques Delors invented the European Economic Area as a way of delaying the entrance of the EFTA states, only to find the institution used to speed up full membership for Austria, Finland and Sweden. He and his successors have established the whole paraphernalia of Europe Association Agreements and Structured Dialogues to buy time, only to find themselves faced by a fully fledged glide-path into an enlarged Union.

The promise of ultimate membership given by the Copenhagen Summit in June 1993 is not absolute, but is certainly firmer than anything offered to previous applicants. The Europe Agreements contained important technical and trade matters, but they will be remembered by historians for political, and what one might call sociological, reasons. The whole process flowing from the Europe Agreements has played an important role of mutual education. Political and civil service elites from the East have been given a crash course in dealing with the institutions, politics and rhetoric of the Union which they seek to join. Some of my Central European colleagues were shaken by the contrast between the cathedral-like rhetoric of the Union and poker-playing morality of its leading exponents. They increasingly recognise that European integration is a hard-nosed exercise in negotiation for mutual benefit, as well as a dance to the geo-political imperatives of a recently ravaged Continent.

In 1989 I took a personal decision to concentrate on Czechoslovak affairs and became a member of what was then the non-functioning European Parliament Delegation to East Germany and Czechoslovakia. This subsequently became Parliament's Delegation to the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic. For two years I was a monthly visitor to the country, learning much and making many friends amongst the intelligent, thoughtful and humorous new political classes of Prague and Bratislava. Many other members of the parliamentary delegation proved loyal to their applicant country of choice and maintained contact throughout the twists and turns of Czechoslovak politics and elections. The Association Agreement with the old state was disrupted by the split into Czech and Slovak Republics. But by the beginning of this European Parliamentary mandate, when I chaired Parliament's Delegation to the Czech, Slovak and Slovene Republics, the shape of the Structured Dialogue and the institutions of the Association Agreement were clear.

In 1995 the Association Agreement was finally ratified and the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) for Relations between the Czech Republic and the European Union came into being. The change from Delegation to JPC meant that we increased the rhythm of meetings and moved the content from general statements to an intense process of mutual education ahead of negotiations. The JPCs are strange bodies. They receive reports both from the European Commission and from the applicant government. They meet alternately in Brussels and the applicant state every six months. There is substantial preparation ahead of each meeting. In addition to the formal reports on the working of the Association Agreement they provide an opportunity for mutual updating on the politics of the Union and of the applicant state. In the case of the Czech JPC, I and my Czech co-chairman instituted a system of parliamentary oversight. The committee now has access to the minutes of all meetings that take place between Commission officials and the government in Prague. The Council of Ministers declined to accept parliamentary attendance at the ministerial meetings of the Structured Dialogue. I cannot say that I lost any sleep over this, as such meetings are almost entirely content-free and are of value only for symbolic purposes. During my time as Chairman, the JPC examined the Commission's White Book and the preparation surrounding the questionnaire in advance of the Commission Opinion on the Czech application for membership.

The formal working of the JPCs is supplemented by an extensive web of personal and political contacts. They provide a focus for the work of diplomats from the applicant state and are studied and observed by a growing army of party officials, stagiaires, journalists and participants in the Union's visitors programme. Government officials, academics and assorted elements of civil society are involved in the work of the JPCs.

There are other aspects to parliamentary relations in the approach to the fifth enlargement. President Hansch initiated a series of meetings between the President of the European Parliament and the Speakers or Presidents of applicant Parliaments. The Chairmen of the Foreign Affairs Committees of applicant states now attend the six-monthly meetings of their European Union counterparts. Ministers, prime ministers and presidents of the applicant states take sensible advantage of their right of access to the European Parliament. Elegant examples of this in recent years include the Foreign Minister of

Estonia arguing his country's preparedness for first wave membership in front of the Foreign Affairs Committee, or the dramatic visit of the newly elected President of Bulgaria to Brussels amidst the chaos of the recent crisis in Sofia. Occasionally such visits leave a lasting impression, as when President Havel spoke to the Plenary Session of the need for Europe to have a soul.

The parliamentary link is of more than merely formal value. As with everything else in the Union, there are never more than twenty people who understand a particular dossier. An informed handful of parliamentarians provide a useful conduit for emergency communication and a reservoir of knowledge and contacts when a crisis arises. Slovenia is a classic example of a small country successfully building a good reputation in Brussels with the help of MEPs. Slovakia, on the other hand, despite the efforts of talented and courageous individuals, is a case study of how to squander parliamentary sympathy.

Parliament is becoming more sophisticated and experienced in its use of JPCs with each successive enlargement. I served on the Portuguese JPC where it seemed to me that parliamentarians played only a limited role. By the time I served on the Swedish JPC, MEPs had become much more active and the committee's work with Swedish colleagues identified political problems such as 'snuss', the much loved Swedish sucking tobacco, at an early enough stage to avoid them becoming fatal. As we move towards the opening of formal negotiations, the JPCs share their work with a Rapporteur appointed by the Foreign Affairs Committee. The Committee has overall responsibility for enlargement, although especially with this enlargement, opinions given by other Committees such as Agriculture, Budgets and Regional Affairs will be of particular significance. The smooth working of the delivery of Parliament's comment on the Commission's Opinion and its final recommendations on the outcome of negotiations will, in my opinion, be substantially enhanced if the Foreign Affairs Committee's Rapporteur is simultaneously a member of the Joint Parliamentary Committee.

Parliament on the Commission's Yes, No and Maybes to the various applicants. Six months will be spent in circling around a form of words to reassure those applicants who have fallen at political, human rights or economic hurdles. The logic of admitting member states by 'order of merit' is unchallengeable, but will no doubt be hedged around with diplomatic language to soften the domestic impact for governments who have not received an unqualified Yes from the Commission. Much ink will be spent on 'enhancing the accession process' and 'intensifying the Structured Dialogue'. The truth is that only six states, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Estonia and Cyprus, have any possibility of fast-track treatment. Even these states are very unlikely to have completed their detailed negotiations before the mandate of the European Parliament runs out in June 1999, followed shortly thereafter by that of the Commission. This Parliament will in all likelihood therefore be the scene of extended trench warfare between those parliamentarians committed to the membership of particular states and other parliamentarians representing the tribal interests likely to be disadvantaged by enlargement.

It is taboo in this enlargement to deny ultimate membership to the applicant states, but there are many who would quietly rejoice were enlargement to be almost indefinitely delayed. Paradoxically for an institution that is formally excluded from all but the act of Assent at the end of the process, it is precisely in these issues of timing and consequences that a newly mature European Parliament will have its greatest impact.

