

“THE PEOPLE VERSUS THE HOGS” – A WORTHY THEME FOR JUNE

The European Election will be overshadowed by enlargement and the Constitution. By comparison with the dramatic struggle in America – nasty, brutish and long – the European Parliament elections will be made to look short, humdrum and irrelevant.

Politics is not fair. The Fifth European Parliament has been a success, but the electorate does not sense this. The new Constitutional Treaty will endow Parliament with legal and budgetary powers that fulfil the wildest hopes of those of us elected in 1979, but the election process still lacks the legitimacy that comes from genuine political struggle. All the indications are that 2004 will see another record low turnout in the European Election, followed by the now-traditional outbreak of breast-beating and appeals to civic duty. Blah! Real people vote because they see that the result matters to their interests. They need sufficient time to understand the issues. They respond to excitement and personality in campaigning. MEPs should spend the 2004 election campaigning to make sure that they have a mandate to produce a real election, with real choice, in 2009. In so doing they will give Parliament a worthy theme for this June.

The Heads of Government and State (aka the HOGS) have hijacked the Union partly because they are a personal soap opera of compelling power. The power structure of Europe 2004 is not so much inter-governmental as inter-prime-ministerial. The HOGS may talk about transparency and accountability, but they prefer to practice the dark arts of power in the privacy of their top table. Increasingly this is a table laid for three not twenty-five. This is not parliamentary democracy. Indeed it is beyond oligarchy. This is Aristotle's “dynasteia”, the rule of the powerful.

Things could be very different in 2009. Hans-Gert Pöttering is right to insist that the next President of the Commission should come from the political family of the largest Group in Parliament. However, as leader of the largest Group he needs to go further. Even if the HOGS conceded such an arrangement, the electorate would rightly sense that the actual choice would still be left to the same magic circle of Prime Ministers. The successful candidate would, as usual, be agreed upon only after a series of vetoes and private agreements. This is the politics of the Holy Roman Empire, complete with “election capitulations” that weaken the whole structure. Instead, the individual members of parties should choose the best candidate for each political family and then let the electorate decide on the next Commission President by the outcome of the Parliamentary election. In the USA they call the same idea “primaries”. In Europe it could be the best way of breathing life into European political parties which are currently little more than “Potemkin” parties.

Let the EPP-ED group announce that in 2009 their candidate for the Presidency of the Commission will be decided by the votes of party members in all 25 countries. The other Party Groups would follow them. A series of primary elections would be held at two-week intervals in February and March. The primaries would start in the five smallest countries and continue every two weeks until the big five voted in late March. To avoid swamping by the parties from the big countries one could divide the number of votes cast for each candidate in each country by that country's voting weight in the Council. Candidates for the post of President would have to declare by January 1st of 2009. If Paris was “worth a mass”, the Presidency of the Commission should be worth six months serious campaigning by the candidates. In each country they would obviously address party rallies and parliamentary caucuses. They would face the local press, practice their smiles on the electorate and their debating skills on each other. By the beginning of April the European electorate would be able to choose between five or six individuals, each representing a coherent political viewpoint. It would strengthen the Commission, the political parties and the European Parliament – and remind the HOGS that theirs is not the only mandate.

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