

“Defence, Parliamentarians - Why we should not trust Governments”

Speech delivered by Mr Tom Spencer, to the Seminar on the Parliamentary Dimension of the European Security and Defence Policy, The Hague, 14th May 2001

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

May I congratulate the Dutch and Belgian governments on their non-paper and on carrying forward this important initiative. May I thank the organisers for inviting me and make it clear that my comments are of an entirely personal nature unconnected to my former role as Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament. I may have moved from being a rather academic politician to become a rather political academic, but I can reassure Elmar Brok that I in no way speak this morning for the European Parliament.

Indeed it is my work on Global Governance that I wish to take as my starting point. I am convinced that proper parliamentary oversight is the key to success at all levels of governance. It is particularly important in areas where the nation state is seen as insufficient such as environment and defence. We are in the process of a paradigm shift. Electorates are better educated, less deferential, and have less faith in governments than they had at the time of the establishment of NATO. They have a greater sense of global identity. The globalisation debate and the emergence of more global governance poses a threat to the parliamentary democracy which we have achieved and which has historically been rooted in the nation state. In this century the effectiveness of policy and institutions is dependent on public consent, and that consent depends on accountability, transparency and legitimacy. This is of particular importance here in Europe. It has been wisely said that it is necessary to win the argument for NATO every twenty years. The same can be said for European integration. This morning we are discussing the parliamentary dimension of the integration of both institutions and we do so against the background of the Future of Europe Debate ahead of an IGC in 2004.

Konrad von Moltke, in the context of environmental global governance, draws a useful distinction between 'organisations' and 'institutions'. The 'organisational' approach is similar to rearranging a jigsaw. It suffers from the problem of organisational heritage at a moment of rapid change and inevitably raises problems of conflicting institutional and personal agendas. In the case which we are considering this morning we have substantial organisational complexity, the geographical expansion of Europe and the problem of sibling rivalry between Parliamentary Assemblies, a rivalry often encouraged by the Executives. The 'institutional' approach requires us instead to look at political processes, purposes and behaviour and to ask the question 'what is needed?'. It is my experience that in the European Union the shortest path between two points is not a straight line. I want therefore to look at an

ideal form of Parliamentary Assembly in this area as it might appear in ten years time. I would like to suggest that our approach should be that of the 'Go Board'. We are engaged in placing pieces on the board which will make sense in the final picture. What do we need from a Parliamentary Assembly on these subjects? What is the essential political logic? What will give it credibility?

The key to the successful creation of a parliamentary assembly in the field of security and defence, lies in the relationship between the European Parliament and the National Parliaments of the Union. If we establish a good working relationship inside the Union, it will then be possible to react intelligently to the applicant states, to the non-EU members of NATO, to the Russians and to other Partners for Peace.

There are three essentials for public credibility: the combination of foreign policy and defence, the involvement of individuals with expertise and influence; and the creation of an elegant structure which the public can comprehend.

It no longer makes sense to discuss defence issues in isolation from the foreign policy of the Union. Work done by the Governance Unit of the European Commission in preparing the White Paper shows that the public regard Europe's place in the world as a major justification for European Integration. Defence issues in the future will be about the exercise of Europe's power in the Balkans, in our 'near-abroad' and will centre in our relationships with North America and with Russia. Any effective assembly must therefore involve both foreign policy experts and defence experts.

Parliamentary assemblies are respected, if at all, for their expertise and influence. It is important therefore that members should not only be multi-hatted participants in other relevant parliamentary assemblies, but should also involve national specialists, who may not have the tradition of attending European level activities. The structure of an ideal Parliamentary Assembly should therefore involve the Committees of the Chairman of Foreign Affairs Committees and of Defence Committees. It is important to involve trans-national political groups as a key building block, indeed members should sit by political group rather than by national delegation. Efforts should be made to involve spokesmen from the various political groups in the national parliaments. For credibility a new parliamentary assembly should have its own research institute and should deliberately cultivate links to think-tanks. It will be respected primarily for the quality of its ideas. It should be intimately linked to the office of the High Representative and to his support team.

Elegance is crucial for public credibility. We should strive to have as few parliamentary assemblies as possible. The current situation is an invitation to be ignored by the public. It is important that the assembly should meet regularly in one place to avoid the accusation of parliamentary tourism. Preferably this should be Brussels, although a case could be made for Strasbourg. A new Parliamentary assembly should rely on the organisational infrastructure of the European Parliament. As far as possible we should apply the 'concentric principle'. National parliamentarians and MEPs should meet first and only subsequently turn to discussions with the rest of NATO or with Russia or to specific issues such as the OSCE.

We are in an interim period and I welcome the establishment of the interim European Security and Defence Assembly, even though I doubt that it is a sufficient basis for

further development. We need to establish a robust working relationship between MEPs and National Parliamentarians in the immediate future while the post-Nice debate about the Future of Europe is open. It may be that we will see the creation of a Second Chamber of the European Parliament composed not of states on the German model but of parliaments. However, regardless of the desirability or otherwise of this development, the areas of foreign policy and defence are an excellent test bed to work out relationships. Both sets of parliamentarians have their own direct mandate. Indeed a vigorous relationship between parliamentarians may indicate ways of controlling the European Council. We should remind the Heads of State and Government, who currently reinvent the Union at every summit, that their claim to power rests ultimately on the mandate of their national parliamentarians, from whom they form their governments.

A new parliamentary assembly should be technologically sophisticated and deliberately inclusive. It should send its working papers and conclusions to all MEPS and to all national MPs electronically. We should give them a sense of ownership in the venture, invite their opinions and answer their questions.

A new assembly should elect its own speaker by a 75% majority. It should abandon the nonsense of the six month revolving presidency. It should have a small and powerful Bureau that meets regularly. Above all it should be free to debate all relevant subjects - landmines, defence and the single market, arms exports, National Missile Defence or Echelon. Governments should realise that there are some things which they cannot discuss for reasons of diplomacy which parliaments can. Such debates are a key to public credibility and would go a long way to meeting the public perception that there was some democratic input to inter-governmental decisions of great importance. In a world where defence is multi-national, the defence industries are multi-national and the challenges are multi-national we can no longer permit the heresy that these matters are only discussed inside national governments. The decisions to make war or risk lives remain national decisions, but that does not justify an impenetrable conspiracy of silence in intergovernmental discussion. The role of public opinion, as expressed by parliamentary debate, was of considerable importance during the Kosovo war.

The Belgian Presidency of the EU is of crucial importance. You should first of all resolve to do no harm and to avoid destroying anything which might be useful until we have something better. You should strive to keep parliamentary control of the process, as governments, with a few notable exceptions, will be at best ambivalent.

These are matters of high seriousness. This debate is about winning public consent for NATO, for the European Union and for their new and intimate relationship. It is about re-invigorating parliamentary democracy, not just in Europe, but as evidence that it is possible to establish an element of democratic, parliamentary oversight in all our common institutions of global governance.

