

***BRITAIN'S VOICE
IN EUROPE:
TIME FOR CHANGE***

Denis MacShane MP

***Preface by
Geoff Hoon***

The Foreign Policy Centre 

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Rt Hon. Denis MacShane MP

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Disclaimer

The views in this paper are not necessarily those of the Foreign Policy Centre.

Preface

I am very pleased to provide a foreword to this important contribution to the debate on the future of Europe. Lively, articulate and radical – it is all that we would expect from Denis MacShane.

Britain has just completed a successful six month Presidency of the EU. A deal was reached on the budget. Turkey's membership moved a step closer to reality. And most importantly, the Presidency helped bring to the surface a debate on the challenges Europe will face in the future.

As a distinguished Minister for Europe from 2002-2005, Denis MacShane has used his wide knowledge and experience to provide a candid assessment of how he sees the current landscape in Europe and to offer a number of practical solutions to improve Britain's influence and Europe's effectiveness.

As a former Minister for Europe myself, and in my current role as Leader of the Commons, I see more clearly than ever the importance of improving the way we engage with European institutions at all levels. I therefore welcome this timely pamphlet and congratulate Denis MacShane and the Foreign Policy Centre for keeping these issues at the top of the political agenda.

Geoff Hoon
Leader of the House of Commons
December 2005

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Introduction

Once again the European question is being asked. What is Europe for? Why are the British so doggedly Eurosceptic? Is the EU a response to 20th century problems no longer really needed in the new era of globalisation? Is there such a thing as a European identity?

The purpose of this pamphlet will be to argue that finding answers to these essentialist questions about Europe provide fascinating topics for political scientists, columnists, and speech- or article-writers for ministers but they are not the right questions.

Instead I will take as a given that the EU is not going to disappear and that Britain will not quit the EU in any foreseeable future. That is the position of most Eurosceptic Conservatives. They argue they want a different EU but not a full withdrawal.

Everyone wants a different EU. The CBI would like a more business-friendly one. John Monks, the British trade union leader, who now heads the European Trade Union Confederation worries about what he calls the rise of 'a left-wing Le Pen movement' as workers and trade unions increasingly feel and fear that 'social Europe' has been discarded and therefore there is no reason for Britain's 28 million employed workers to support an EU moving only in the direction of more power to employers, chief executives and union-hostile managers.

The opposite view can be heard from many business leaders, namely that the European labour market is over-regulated and Brussels issues too many directives in favour of social or environmental rights that stop economies lifting their game to meet the awesome challenges of globalisation.

This pamphlet will not seek to enter into these arguments. Instead it will seek to answer a question that our scratchy, name-calling EU debate in Britain fails to ask: how can Britain maximise its influence in Europe and what new mechanisms or policies are needed to

achieve greater democratic oversight of the decisions taken in our name by the European Union.

Understanding how the EU makes decisions and how to influence them

It is a commonplace that an increasing amount of the legislation and policy options for the UK are determined within the framework of our membership of the EU.

The power and presence of Europe in British legislation is sometimes exaggerated. The House of Commons Library says less than 10 per cent of all UK laws originate in Europe (although 50 per cent of all relevant business legislation now stems from Brussels). Yet there is no department of state which does not have to factor in EU decisions to its policy and legislation.

In every part of Britain, business, local government, the public agencies like the NHS or the police have to take into account EU legislation or European cooperation and contacts. Companies like Easyjet, Ryanair, or Jet2.com are only able to fly millions of British citizens at low prices to scores of new destinations in Europe thanks to the rules imposed and supervised by the European Commission.

The noise and chaff about Europe from pro- and anti-European forces in politics and the press (with the latter sadly deforming the necessary debate about European construction into a puppet show of myths, straw-men, and caricature of the complex nature of European decision-making) masks the real question of how Britain extracts maximum advantage from membership of the EU.

Given that no-one seriously imagines Britain quitting the EU and thus losing all the advantages of open trade, open travel, and the extension of democracy associated with the EU, how can Britain make sure that it exercises the maximum influence over the way the EU takes its decisions? Furthermore, how can it scrutinise those decisions once they are taken, in order to reduce the sense citizens have of impotence face to face with rules or decisions emanating from Brussels?

Sharing Sovereignty

From the first glimmerings of the EU in 1950 when six war-torn European countries, including the legendary enemies, France and Germany, decided to give up exclusive national sovereignty and share control over their national steel and coal industries in the first common European political-economic union, the leaders of Britain have never questioned that giving up some sovereignty would be in our national interest, if in return, Britain won greater market possibilities and the chance to influence the decisions over what other nations were allowed to do. Winston Churchill put it thus in a debate on Europe in the House of Commons in 1950:

We are prepared to consider and, if convinced, to accept the abrogation of national sovereignty, provided we are satisfied with the conditions and safeguards. National sovereignty is not inviolable, and it may be resolutely diminished for the sake of all the men in all the lands finding their way home together.

The approach of Britain to EU legislation has been to use normal Whitehall political-bureaucratic mechanisms before and during the decision-making process. Specialist lobbies in Brussels also get involved as do British industrial or trade organisations. However, there is a law of unintended consequences in EU law-making (as in any national legislative outcomes) which often means that the impact or reach of decisions can be different from those originally desired. Once the EU has published a draft directive they are subject to parliamentary scrutiny. Britain is more advanced than most national parliaments in creating a system of scrutiny, but once the EU decisions have taken the form of draft EU laws or decrees, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to change them.

The running order of EU decisions is that the Commission and National Governments (Council of Ministers) propose legislation and then the political process of discussing the legislation kicks in.

It is time to reverse these priorities. The purpose of this pamphlet is to argue that Britain needs to be involved at a much earlier stage in publicly discussing EU decisions. Parliament needs to put itself into

the EU decision making process, particularly in terms of EU laws that impact business, social or environmental affairs, before they are finalised.

Business in particular needs to take a new interest in EU law-making by working with MPs and MEPs at an early stage to identify any problems or to overcome opposition to directives that are in Britain's economic or foreign policy interests. The same is true for the interests of British citizens who want to live and work in EU member states with the confidence that they enjoy safeguards and rights as they would as British citizens living in the UK.

A new approach to EU decision making

To achieve the ambitions we want for Britain, a completely new approach to European politics and EU decision-making is required. European decisions often start or are shaped in national capitals well before they are translated into specific proposals to be discussed in Brussels and Strasbourg.

Yet the House of Commons has an inadequate system for dealing with EU legislation. MPs are not encouraged to represent their constituents' interests in the EU. Policy and political networking in capital cities – where EU policy originates and is decided – is virtually non-existent. MPs and Whitehall departments have poor linguistic training or travel allowances to increase UK knowledge about Europe.

The disconnect between the European Parliament and national parliaments is a serious problem.

Various ministers have been tinkering with various ideas for changing this but only now with the arrival of Geoff Hoon, a former MEP and briefly a Europe Minister, as Leader of the House, plus the continuing commitment to strong Parliamentary scrutiny and involvement of Jack Straw, the present Foreign Secretary, is there now a momentum in government for change.

At the moment, Parliament has a European Scrutiny Committee¹ which receives all EU communications and decides which need to be taken further forward by one of the three EU standing committees.² The European Scrutiny Committee, therefore, is a kind of sifting body. It can ask for a full debate on the floor of the Commons but usually it passes its work to one of three European standing committees. They are similar to committees that discuss secondary legislation (Statutory Instruments). A Minister appears and makes a statement in support of the EU proposal which, by the time it arrives for discussion at the Standing Committee, has been agreed by national governments and therefore is deemed to have the Whitehall stamp of approval. Any MP can ask a question in addition to nominated Committee members. A vote may be taken but when I was Minister for Europe I can recall no such vote and usually after debate the proposed EU directive becomes UK law.

There is a parallel European committee system in the House of Lords. The House of Lords European Legislation Select Committee and its sub-committees tend to discuss current and future policy development in the EU and do so with a great deal of expert knowledge. They are an important check on a Minister who has to appear before these committees and explain in details the 'what's', 'why's' and 'what-if's' of difficult areas of EU policy such as defence and foreign relations. All these procedures are a useful reminder to Ministers of the need to make themselves accountable to Parliament in terms of EU policy and legislation. But the exercise tends to be ex-post facto – discussing decisions already taken by national governments in the Council of Ministers.

Of course, major European matters like changes in the Treaties or the Budget require primary UK legislation and bills have to be prepared and put to the Commons and Lords in the normal manner. The debates and divisions over the Maastricht Treaty live in

¹ The European Scrutiny Committee is a Select Committee of the House of Commons.

² A Parliamentary Standing Committee looks in detail at a proposed law and can suggest amendments. The European Standing Committees do not have that power which is why its title may be misleading in terms of parliamentary practice and procedure.

Commons history. However, as the European Community, now the European Union, is a treaty-based organisation Parliament has to decide on a take it or leave it basis whether to vote for the Treaty. By definition, any Treaty signed by sovereign governments cannot be amended by any individual signatory nation. Parliaments have to say Yes or No. Some EU member states demand a referendum before approving a Treaty. Referendums or plebiscites are devices that undermine representative parliamentary democracy. They are not in themselves good or bad though they do undermine classic parliamentary processes and hand great power to populist demagogues, press interests and those who have bottomless wells of money to spend on advertising their ideological position for or against the question to be decided.

European legislation fixed by time it arrives at Westminster

Decisions in parliament on major treaty changes or other primary legislation to give effect to EU decisions – an example was the law to allow East European workers to come and work in the UK – are openly debated. But Parliament cannot vote via primary legislation on decisions which lie in EU areas of competence. And Britain would not want 24 other national parliaments to alter EU legislation which promoted UK interests but which ran against the wishes of sectoral interests of other EU member states.

Late in 2005, for example, Margaret Beckett, the UK agricultural minister persuaded her fellow EU ministers to reduce substantially sugar subsidies which distorted the world market in sugar and kept EU sugar prices artificially high. The Irish Times headlined this deal as meaning the end of the Irish sugar industry. That may or may not be true but it would make the EU impossible if Irish MPs linked to their national sugar industry tried to alter the common EU agreement because it did not suit Irish sugar producers. And the same is true across the board of EU legislation. Britain needs to shape these laws before they are agreed and sent to national parliaments at the end of the process.

So what can be done to give citizens a sense that the Commons is able to have adequate oversight of what the EU does. If the European Scrutiny Committee and the European Standing

Committees do not provide that mechanism, what can replace them?

A Parliamentary Innovation

In a parliamentary innovation, the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, a keen parliamentarian himself, set up a special committee of both Houses of Parliament during the negotiations over the Constitutional Treaty. Ministers had to report to the Committee on the conduct and process of the talks between governments. It was the first time in British history that ministers negotiating a Treaty had to report to MPs and Peers during the course of the negotiations. In the past, government ministers negotiated a Treaty that would be ratified in Parliament but no-one previously suggested that the ministers' negotiating hand should be under regular parliamentary scrutiny during the Treaty negotiations themselves. Straw's important new precedent was a Parliamentary first.

Unfortunately, Parliament could not have been said to have risen to the offer. Not a single Conservative Party front-bench spokesman on Europe or foreign affairs turned up for a committee meeting. Bill Cash, the veteran anti-EU Tory who was briefly shadow Attorney General did appear to fire some of his anti-European salvos. Mr Cash was supported by various veteran campaigners against Europe from the House of Lords, including Lord Rees-Mogg and others who use newspapers and other networks to fulminate against the EU.

As Europe Minister at the time I was disappointed that this specially created committee did not produce a more considered response by the opposition. But Straw was right to give Parliament the chance to examine the Government's position as the tricky negotiations on the new EU constitutional treaty took place.

Peter Hain, one of our more energetic ministers and with 20 months' experience as Europe Minister under his belt also came up with ambitious proposals when he was Leader of the House of Commons. He wanted to set up a European Grand Committee with peers and MPs able to cross-question ministers on European matters.

The Commons Debates Europe

As it happens there are full-length debates on EU matters in the main chamber of the Commons prior to the full European Council meetings at the end of each 6-month presidency. I have attended all of them since 1994. Perhaps because there is no vote at the end of the debate and the real political meat lies in whatever decision the European Council takes in the days following the Commons debate, there is little interest shown by MPs in these debates. There stand pro- and anti-European MPs on both sides of the House who make their speeches with well-worn arguments that those who follow the UK debate on Europe closely already know by heart.

A more important Parliamentary event is the Monday afternoon statement by the Prime Minister upon return from the European Council. Then the House is full, the Leader of the Opposition and other MPs can challenge the Prime Minister directly and the media and MPs are alive to what was decided by the EU over the weekend. There may be a case for eliminating the pre-Council debate, which attracts little interest, and having the PM's statement with a full day's debate on the Monday after the Council meeting. There should also be a further provision for the Opposition to call for a vote if they believe the Government has not done well. At least there would be a proper sense of Parliamentary occasion, debate and division.

It is difficult to see how a Grand Committee will attract other than the usual suspects to discuss Europe. European Commissioners already come to give evidence to Select Committees in the specific fields of their executive competence and finding time to question 25 Commissioners in detail – assuming that 24 other national parliaments as well as the European Parliament do not want to set up similar procedures – may be hard for the schedulers in both Westminster and Brussels. It is hardly fair to ask a Commissioner to come to London to face the clichés of the anti-European fanatics who simply want to oppose the EU. Their time might be better spent undertaking their duties as Commissioners and getting on with making the EU work better.

Other useful proposals that are being discussed include setting up five distinct European Standing Committees that would be named after the main areas they would consider. They could be called:

- European Economic and Finance Committee;
- European Industrial, Market and Trade Committee;
- European Foreign and Defence Committee;
- European Social and Environmental Affairs Committee;
- European Justice and Home Affairs Committee.

Thus titled, and with a permanent chair, who would be paid on the same basis as chairs of Select Committee, the work of European scrutiny would move into the mainstream of parliamentary work. These Committees should go beyond examination of EU documents and questioning of ministers. They should meet in Brussels and in other European capitals to take evidence and to listen to the perspectives of other European governments and politicians. They should initiate and commission work in their spheres of competence. Somewhere between the drafting and policy work of a government department and the analysis and proposals of think tanks like the Foreign Policy Centre, as well as the excellent work undertaken by UK universities on Europe, there should be space for Parliament to take a lead not just in scrutinising EU legislation but in seeking to shape the future direction of Britain's involvement in Europe and the EU itself.

Political networking

Influence in Europe is based on political networking. This poses problems for the British system of government which seeks to create a civil service which is insulated fully from political belief, connections and networks. This proclaimed neutering of state service from any contamination by political affiliation makes little sense in most other European countries.

Civil servants in most EU member states are of high quality, selected after rigorous examinations, and open to talent with promotion based on merit. But few on the continent believe that serving the public good and the state requires the civil servant to

become a political eunuch. In France, graduates of the *Ecole nationale d'administration* – the elite training college for France's top administrative class – move easily between civil service positions, working in ministerial cabinets, becoming elected politicians themselves, or transferring to business.

In Spain, foreign ministers are often experienced diplomats linked to one of the two big parties. In Germany and Austria, the idea of democracy is based on competing democratic political parties and it is normal for senior federal or regional civil servants to be identified with a political party.

No-one disputes their integrity, nor their disinterest in seeking the best solutions to the problems they are confronted with. But neither is there any pretence that adult, mature citizens who help shape the decisions or guide the policy for their country are without political belief or affiliation.

The gap between the 19th century British tradition of an apolitical civil service and the continental sense that state service cannot deny political affiliation makes it difficult for Britain to maximise networking influence in Europe prior to EU policy decisions being made.

Put simply, diplomats in post in EU capitals or civil servants flying out from Whitehall ministries cannot talk to policy-makers or decision-takers in EU capital with the same intimacy as political representatives of the UK – namely MPs, MEPs, and other senior elected political figures in the UK. For example, most conservative parties in the EU are strong supporters of the Common Agricultural Policy. It is little use the political class in Britain agreeing with itself that the CAP should be abolished because centre-right politicians representing rural areas of Ireland, Austria, Spain, Italy and so forth do not read the Daily Telegraph or the Guardian who both agree that CAP should go.

Instead, Britain should organise a flow of conservative MPs to visit their fellow conservatives in Europe and make the case for CAP reform. Similarly, the third world and development NGOs in Britain as well as the church-based development movements should be

encouraged and helped to make contact with their sister outfits in other EU member states to make the case for CAP reform to allow more trade into Europe from poorer countries.

This poses a challenge to the Foreign Office, the principal ministry dealing with contacts in European capitals. The FCO dislikes getting its hands too dirty with political work. The nature of Britain's adversarial political system with a winner-takes-all philosophy based on the first-past-the-post elections makes it hard for the FCO to do other than work with a narrow group of ministers from the winning party.

Increasing UK influence in Europe

In the past, the Foreign Office has known how to increase political networking and done so with some skill. Under the Conservatives, the Foreign Office set up the Westminster Foundation of Democracy and the Know-How Fund to help build contacts between the UK and the new politicians in the countries emerging from the Soviet empire. They were created as semi-autonomous agencies with FCO funding and support after the wall of the Berlin Wall. Both bodies worked with British political parties, business and trade unions to support the creation of democratic political, economic and social actors in the new states emerging from the Soviet imperium.

DfID, the international development ministry, spends scores of millions in countries like India and China which are now economic competitors and potential G8 members. According to parliamentary replies, DfID has given more than £1 billion to consultants like the Adam Smith Institute since its inception in 1997. Since 2000, DfID has sent more than £1 billion to India even though India has more millionaires than Britain and runs its own development aid programme for poor countries.

European Networking Centre

For a fraction of these costs, the government could set up a European Networking Centre to support MPs, political parties, the CBI, EEF, BCC and regional development agencies as well as with

the TUC in order to promote UK ideas and influence in EU decision making processes. The Treasury pays £100,000 a year to the British-American Parliamentary Group to encourage links between British parliamentarians and their opposite numbers in the US Congress. The BAPG has a full-time secretariat and the resources to support a number of networking events. As a result British policy-makers are exposed to the thinking of American legislators and vice-versa. It is time to put in sufficient resources to all make similar connections between British parliamentarians and their colleagues in the EU.

Similarly, there should be a boost to regional activity. Regional groups of business and council leaders, MPs and other relevant sectors should be encouraged to visit EU regions to explain British priorities and needs in the EU.

The object would be to identify the political decision-makers on EU affairs in each capital of Europe and help British equivalents get to know them better. An annual plan of action would be drawn up to send missions of British political and economic actors to explain British priorities in the EU and urge support.

In particular, British political parties need to up their game in terms of networking in EU capitals. The Labour Party has at best a thin level of contact with sister political parties while the Conservatives hardly attend any of the key leadership gatherings of the EU's centre-right parties.

The Tory leader, David Cameron, pledged during his leadership campaign to pull the Conservatives out of the Europe-wide grouping of conservative, Christian democrat and mainstream right-wing parties called the European People's Party. This federation groups together conservative parties in the European Parliament. Its leaders meet under the chairman of the European Commission President, Jose Manuel Barroso, for dinner on the eve of each European Council meeting. It seems a perverse decision of Mr Cameron, at a time when the sister parties of the British Conservatives are in the ascendant in the EU, form the largest block in the European Parliament, and have a majority of the EU Commissioners drawn

from their ranks, to sever all links with future partners on the continent.

The passions of Conservative anti-Europeanism are a private matter for the party and its new leadership. But Britain suffers from not having its case made to the European right by their fellow right-wingers in the Conservative Party.

Liberal-Democrats are formally pro-European but other than hard-working Lib-Dem MEPs, they have no presence as a political force in other EU capitals. Continental liberalism is often much harder to the right of conservatism or Christian democracy. British Liberal-Democrats want to walk both sides of the political street – Tory, tough and even a little racist when it comes to winning traditional Conservative votes but then socially aware, environmentally sound, and strongly anti-American when it is a question of appealing to Guardian-reading voters who otherwise might vote Labour.

The Liberal-Democratic leadership is strongly pro-European and there are some effective Lib-Dem MEPs. On issues like Turkey's bid to join the EU or the need for effective reform of the EU budget, the Lib-Dems can play a useful role in explaining to their sisters parties across the Channel the arguments in favour of change, reform and opening up the EU.

Ignorance weakens UK influence

One of the weakest areas in contemporary British politics is the poor level of policy discussion and debate in political parties. The press and a tiny handful of policy specialists close to the leaders of political parties now decide most of the policy priorities for either the Government or the main opposition parties.

Parties in government and opposition focus most resources on campaigning and communication. As a result, party members and those who go on to elected office rarely have time to discuss policy.

Nowhere is this more true than on Europe where the distortions and inaccuracies of the partisan press simply prevent any calm,

knowledge-based discussion by political parties of the EU. Unlike major European papers who give significant space to coverage of Europe – the decisions taken in Brussels, the political developments in other EU member state – there is no British paper, other than the Financial Times, that gives space each day to regular European news coverage. Papers have knowledgeable Brussels correspondents but few are allowed regular and sufficient space in their papers to report on Europe.

Political parties have to prioritise their policy development work. All politics is local and domestic issues like tax, security, pensions, welfare and the NHS naturally have more purchase than the EU. Yet given that up to half the regulations or laws governing UK business activity now stem from the decision to create the Single Market on the basis of common standards and regulations, no modern political party can prepare for power or government to maximum efficiency without policy expertise in the EU. The comic book caricatures of much EU press coverage makes for enjoyable or despairing reading according to taste but the reduction of much discussion of the EU to a simplistic pro- or ant-European knockabout avoids the obligation to treat EU policy and laws as important in their own right for British citizens.

A Role for the Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission is charged with increasing the level of informed debate in all political parties. But the EC does little, if anything, on European policy. The Department for International Development funds the Overseas Development Institute which works with development organisations and academics on serious programmes of research and evaluation of UK development policy.

The time has come to consider creating a new European Policy Foundation to encourage policy work on Europe and to resource political parties so that they, in turn, can promote effective EU policy discussion in their own ranks.

Finding and paying for properly qualified staffers to work in political parties on Europe is not easy. In mono-lingual Britain the flow of party officials with a working knowledge of European languages is

limited. One way forward would be for the FCO to second two young diplomats (or those in the last two or three years of their career for whom it is sometimes difficult to find interesting and stimulating employment at the FCO) to the party head office of the main parties to act as a European political secretariat for party leadership. Provided the rotation was regular and the secondments of limited duration, on a voluntary basis and provided to all three main parties there should be no problem about diplomats crossing the road from the Foreign Office to work in party head offices. If anything, the Foreign Office, whose officials are notoriously cut off from the modus operandi of Parliament and political parties, would benefit from having a number of its officials who have seen political work from the inside of parties or the Commons.

Government coordination and cooperation

European Expertise Needed in Ministries

Government should go further and insist that top appointments in ministries or regional government offices should have as a requirement from a candidate some work experience in the EU and a working knowledge of one EU language. It is rare to meet a top French, German, or Dutch decision-taker in national or regional administration who does not know a second EU language. Alas, the top echelons of Whitehall have, at best, a handful of moderately competent French speakers and policy-makers in Britain who have a working knowledge of the language of Britain's second biggest trading partner after the United States, namely Germany, can be counted on one hand.

Whitehall relies on expert, often technically brilliant diplomats in Brussels to carry the UK's case through the complexities of EU decision-making. What is needed is enhanced presence in national capitals and understanding of the inter-action of national and Brussels priorities. Prevention or early intervention is better than long defensive battles in the corridors of Brussels because Britain did not spot the dangers in a proposal before it was well down the path of being launched.

Peter Mandelson, the legendary Labour spin doctor and now a senior EU Commissioner, used to tell the Labour Party that repetition was the art of political communication. Only when you have repeated a message so many times, in always the same way, using the same words over and over again until you are sick and tired of hearing them, only at that point is there the faintest chance that your message might be getting through to the audience you are aiming at.

A good example is the failure of Britain to persuade its European partners of the need to reform the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). CAP-bashing comes easily and automatically to British politicians of every hue. Labour and Conservatives, the CBI and the TUC, the Guardian and the Daily Mail all unite around the proposition that CAP must go. But telling ourselves what we like to hear does not mean that anyone else is listening. And since British politicians are rarely as vocal in this criticism of the equal and worse protectionism in the United States or Japan, countries like Ireland, France, Italy, Spain and others who feel they benefit from the CAP simply turn off when London works itself up into one of its periodic frenzies about the CAP.

How much better if the UK encouraged its networks of churches, development NGOs, and other international networkers to talk to their opposite numbers in pro-CAP countries and see if some meeting of minds might be reached. Why does the Church in Ireland, or the Irish equivalents of Oxfam, Save the Children and Cafod, appear to fall in behind the agro-protectionism of the Irish government? Have British campaigners against the CAP found the right arguments? British agro-industrial concerns and large land-owners enjoy the biggest single payments under the CAP regime – more large-sum cheques are sent to the UK than to any other country. At long last, the government has published details of who receives CAP largesse in the UK, after decades of treating this information as secret, and it turns out the Queen, the Co-operative Society and various blue chip firms get the biggest CAP payments. Supporters of CAP elsewhere in the EU simply see Britain's protests as hypocritical as ministers refuse any change to the present CAP

payments regime which so favours a handful of rich landowners and farmers in the UK.

Few critics of CAP make the necessary distinction between agriculture and rurality or rural life. The former should not fear competition – a debate decided in Britain with the abolition of the Corn Laws 160 years ago – but the requirement to promote rurality and the nature of the countryside is a legitimate European project. After all, scores of millions of British visitors to rural France, Italy or Spain enjoy the pleasures of a well-tended countryside which only exists, in part, thanks to the payments under CAP.

Moreover, the leading countries clamouring for abolition of the CAP include Australia and New Zealand which are not poor nations. Powerful and wealthy Brazilian agro-multinationals who have destroyed the rain forests of the Amazon and carried out terminal assaults on local communities in order to breed billions of plastic-tasting chickens are ready to swamp markets with their products in a fashion that will do little to help those who should benefit from an opening of agricultural trade – the poorer farmers of the developing world.

So if Britain wants to make the case for CAP reform it must do so on a basis that helps those who need access to European markets, not advanced rich countries or the rapacious environment destroying agro-multinationals of North and South America.

It should be possible to forge an alliance in Europe for CAP reform on the basis of a new regime that directly helps trade access from the poorer farmers in the world. If Britain makes the case for CAP reform simply to swell the profits of agro-multinationals in some of the richest countries in the world like Australia or New Zealand or nations with grotesque levels of inequality and wealth-distribution like Brazil or India it will be hard to find many takers for this approach amongst the small farmers and political leaders with a voting base in or other connection with rural communities in most EU member states.

Coordination between Government departments

Whereas the coordination amongst Whitehall officialdom of the UK's approach to EU dossiers is efficient and well-managed the ministerial coordination is lacking. Tony Blair got the FCO to set up a ministerial coordination committee which allowed junior ministers from each department to meet every two months to discuss common European problems and policies. At times, the junior ministers would meet in Downing Street and be urged by the Prime Minister to be more present and confident in their political work on EU matters, not the least in the arena of public debate in the UK and within the Labour Party and Parliament.

A certain *esprit de corps* began to develop and it was useful for politicians to come together within government to talk about common European problems. In 2003, this committee was shut down. Theoretically, its work was now undertaken by a cabinet sub-committee attended sometimes by cabinet-rank ministers and chaired by the Foreign Secretary. This committee quickly became bogged down in the immediate negotiating worry that the government had in trying to stop a directive or policy from being imposed on the UK. Many committee meetings were taken up with the issue of rulings from the European Court of Justice, which imposed some limitation on the working hours of doctors in hospitals.

The British public would probably have welcomed any effort to reduce the number of exhausted doctors working around the clock and taking life-or-death medical decisions at the end of consecutive hours of work that no other professional is required to put in. Moreover, Britain had had several years notice to put in place new arrangements for doctors' hours which would have been in conformity with the still very liberal EU regulations. Instead, cabinet minister and junior colleagues spent hours locked in the Cabinet Office trying to devise strategies to ward off the moment when sleep-starved doctors in our hospitals might have a little pressure taken off them. From the point of view of managing the hospital sector of the NHS, any imposed requirement to alter work-time patterns – even if

it was to the benefit of patients – had a cost implication in an NHS itself going through radical upheaval to make it more patient-responsive.

But an hour-long cabinet committee would take place where the only issue being discussed would be the handling tactics of picayune negotiations, over which other cabinet and junior ministers could have no real influence.

Instead of discussing a strategic approach to the EU – how best to maximise British influence and leadership in Europe, and on the basis of that discussion and analysis, set out a plan of action for ministers to undertake – top politicians found themselves second-guessing work already competently undertaken by officials.

Part of the problem is the totemic nature of EU business and the unwillingness of cabinet ministers to delegate properly European work for fear that shoving responsibility and leadership further down the ministerial chain of authority would lead to mistakes or media coverage that could reflect badly on the most senior minister in the departmental team. Robin Cook, for example, rarely bothered with, indeed even spoke to, the many Europe Ministers who served under him and as a result decisions that should have been taken at their appropriate level had to wait for his personal attention, as and when that became available given the many world-wide problems a Foreign Secretary should be focussing on.

A Europe Minister in Each Department

In a sensible organisation of government, each department would have a minister of state below cabinet rank in charge of European policy and coordination. In addition, each cabinet member should have a second Parliamentary Private Secretary to act as a link between MPs and the shaping of European policy in the department. These PPSs should be encouraged to take part in European networking and to make contacts with fellow politicians working in equivalent areas of departmental responsibility. Ultimately of course, each cabinet minister must have final responsibility for EU policy. Such is the nature of cabinet government. But to exercise influence in Europe and be able to respond accurately to the concerns of

citizens, government needs more of its ministers and PPSs to be involved in European affairs.

Civil servants do not get everything right and can be either too cautious or too enthusiastic about policy towards the EU or proposals emanating from the EU. It is the job of elected politicians to provide some democratic control over what the Whitehall machine says and does in relations to Europe. Reducing EU decisions to the level of cabinet ministers – many of whom speak no other language nor at the beginning of their appointment have any specialist political or policy knowledge of Europe – is an invitation to get policy wrong.

A European Senate

The disconnect between the European Parliament and the people of Europe is acknowledged by MEPs themselves. In some countries, the Strasbourg Parliament is where political parties send party functionaries so that they can have an elected post plus the salary and expenses of an MEP. There is no European demos. Elections to the European Parliament reflect the state of popularity of government parties or the popularity of the EU as a whole. Thus in 1994, when the Conservative government was at the height of its unpopularity, Labour MEPs constituted more than a tenth of all members of the European Parliament. A decade later Labour MEPs do not even constitute 10 per cent of the socialist group of MEPs. In their place have come a weird concoction of anti-European MEPs in parties like UKIP, Veritas or the hardline Eurosceptic Conservative MEPs who have helped drag the Conservatives to the position where the party is today.

Although the majority party in Strasbourg was the right-wing European People's Party group, the president of the Parliament was the Spanish Socialist, Josip Borell. It therefore made little sense to vote right or left if the votes of Europeans were simply discounted by MEPs who allocated top positions to each other on the basis of buggin's turn rather than on the commonly understood parliamentary rules of the majority principle. A significant number of MEPs from various countries were elected on a completely rejectionist ticket.

Thus the UKIP spokesman announced he was only going to Strasbourg to destroy the Parliament. This Guy Fawkes approach to European parliamentarianism amuses tabloid readers but, along with the sillier demonstrations of holding up placards or wearing t-shirts in opposition to a speaker, MEPs do not like the student union-type behaviour that only serves to lessen the respect the European Parliament commands. A former Danish MEP, John Iverson, attributes some of the problems to the disproportionate influence that MEP staffers have. 'There are 20 members of staff for just 5 Danish MEPs and each one tries to keep the MEP busy doing things that probably do not need doing.' Certainly the giant European Parliament building in Strasbourg and Brussels seem disproportionately large by comparison to the other single chamber parliaments of the democratic world, all the more so as they are unoccupied for more than 40 weeks a year.

A way round this democratic disconnect would be to elect the European Parliament on a rolling basis, either at the same time as national elections or changing one third every three years, like the US senate so that the choice of the people for their national parliaments is better aligned with those they send to Strasbourg. Can it make sense for MEPs to be so out of line with where their national parliament and governments are?

Another measure that needs re-visiting is the idea of a second chamber of the European Parliament, composed of national parliamentarians. A European Senate based on parity of seats for each nation underlines the principle of the centrality of the nation state in EU construction. Nominated by national parliaments a second chamber or European Senate would be an effective revising body over legislative proposals emanating from the European Parliament.

European Senators would be based in their national states as active parliamentarians there and be an important link between the citizens of Europe and the legislation imposed in part upon them thanks to the deliberations of the European Parliament. A European Senate could meet full-time in Brussels leaving the European Parliament to concentrate its work fully in bi-lingual Strasbourg which is still the

symbolic central meeting point for east, west, north and south Europe and which over time can develop into a truly post-national European city-region attracting research institutes, a real European University, and the other private-public institutions which gravitate to centres of political power and legislative decision-making. The invaluable work of the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights make Strasbourg more than an EU city but a space which allows the wider Europe from Iceland to the Black Sea nations feel their status.

The complaints by MEPs about Strasbourg are misplaced. With every bit of European paperwork now able to be transported on a memory stick, the convoys of lorries moving between Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg are redundant. On the contrary, far from focussing on Brussels, the European Parliament should seek to move its committee meetings, and on occasion a plenary session, around the major cities of Europe so that the voters can see for themselves what is being done in their name. The European Parliament should take a long hard look at itself and start to generate 21st century ideas of connecting itself to the people. This is more than the eternal plea for better communication or the demand that national governments make propaganda for the worth and value of the European Parliament. The injunction 'Physician: Heal Thyself!' applies to the European Parliament as much as to any other body which knows in its heart that is out of touch with the public.

Some MEPs claim that the second chamber of the European Parliament is the Council of Ministers. This is old federal-speak which ignores the fact that ministers are representatives of nationally-elected governments and accountable to national parliaments. To describe the Council of Ministers as the second chamber of the European Parliament insults both. The first has executive and some veto powers while the latter consents to and can substantially alter EU legislation. It also holds the Commission directly to account. Second chambers add to parliamentary legitimacy and MEPs should welcome, rather than object to, the concept of a European Senate which can only strengthen the parliamentary status of European legislation back in EU member states.

In Britain, most MEPs are full-time European parliamentarians and in all main parties take their duties seriously. As a result British MEPs have over the years occupied a number of important posts on the basis of election of fellow MEPs who recognise the hard work and professional parliamentary style of Britain's 78 elected MEPs.

The criticisms that are made of MEPs, whether from Eurosceptic colleagues in Westminster or a press that delights to mock their work miss the point. The real challenge of the European Parliament is to make common cause with the other elected parliamentarians of Europe to create a sense of parliamentary control and accountability over the laws passed in the EU's name.

Next steps

In 2005, French and Dutch voters killed the proposed European Constitution Treaty in national referenda. There is no need to weep over a text which should never have been called a Constitution and which was proposed at the wrong time, by the wrong people, in the wrong manner. As Europe Minister I was horrified at the wish of some colleagues in government to promote this inter-governmental treaty as a 'constitution' and I refused to sign an official letter or agree to a parliamentary answer unless it referred accurately to the true status of the new rule-book, namely that it was a treaty signed by sovereign states. This has been true of all aspects of development of Europe since the first treaties on the steel and coal industries back in 1950, a Labour government refused to sign up to. This ushered in the long, continuing history of Britain lagging rather than leading in Europe and being also obliged to react to the decisions of others rather than developing a coherent policy for European construction and making the necessary alliances and compromises to achieve our goals.

But in the Treaty killed by the French and Dutch there was much that was useful, including a clearer role for national governments gathered in the Council of Ministers. The proposed standing chair or president of the Council of Ministers would have been a useful counter-weight to the Presidents of the European Commission and

European Parliament, who speak for the European institutions, but who (correctly) have to be disconnected from national roots.

Doing away with the 6-month rotating presidency was also desirable as well as the clarification of the role of the European foreign affairs spokesperson or minister. It is interesting, in passing, to note that in the early days of European Construction, the architects of Europe sensibly avoided using government terminology like laws, ministers or cabinets. Instead, there were 'commissioners' or 'high representatives', 'directives' or 'councils'. A law by any other name smells the same and most Commissioners have more powers than the most powerful of national ministers. Javier Solana has been a superb exponent and explainer of European foreign policy without bothering about the title of minister. One of the mistakes of Brussels insiders has been to keep insisting to the peoples of Europe that the EU is a putative state. Even though they know this is not the case, the drift since the 1990s to adopting the vocabulary of national governments – 'laws', 'minister' etc – has led to an increase in fear that the European project is a replacement for the parliaments, laws and democratically accepted political systems of governance associated with the nation states of Europe.

At some stage the European Union will have to write a new rule book. Under the Nice Treaty, there will soon be no longer a Commissioner for each country. No-one knows how to balance decision-making if a giant country like Turkey joins the EU. British Euro-sceptics often say they support Turkey joining the EU but this cannot be achieved without a new constitutional treaty. They will have to decide if their opposition to the EU is more important than their desire to see Turkey locked into the democratic rules, open market and rule of law the EU has promoted across the continent.

Others hope that if only Britain were more robust and aggressive towards the EU, it could force through changes. The desire for a kind of British Gaullism – a strong nationalist lead which would shake up the perceived do-nothings in Brussels and other EU capitals – may win headlines in the anti-European press but the other countries of Europe will just shrug their shoulders at such hectoring and lecturing from London and get on with shaping a

Europe in which Britain's voice is a whine from the side-line not a voice of leadership. Britain deserves better, as does Europe.

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Rt Hon Douglas Alexander MP

October 2005

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This pamphlet is a contribution to the debate on the future direction of Europe. It sets out why the traditional case for Europe is failing to convince. It explains why pro-Europeans in Britain need not just to rehearse the EU's past achievements, but must also confidently and clearly explain the relevance of the EU to the challenges of the future, and in particular to the dramatic changes in the external political and economic environment provoked by globalisation. And it describes how the European Union can secure its objectives of peace, prosperity, and democracy and become a vehicle for economic progress and social justice for all the citizens of Europe – but only if it embraces rather than avoids change.

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We are at a decisive moment in the development of both the European Union and the democratic left. European politics must not be allowed to become a competitive struggle between different national approaches. This pamphlet argues that a social model of

the future must reflect a synthesis of what is best in each whilst still facilitating advances which accord with national preferences and conditions. In this process, Britain has much to offer, but it also still has much to learn. Future policies should include a minimum standard of universal childcare set by the European Union that would boost educational performance and promote social mobility. The response to Europe's current problems cannot be to retreat into the politics of national isolationism or to narrow our agenda to the solitary task of creating an economic market. The peoples of Europe want much more than that. They want the opportunity to thrive in the global era without compromising their prosperity, security, freedom and social standards. Our ability to meet those aspirations has always been the fundamental test of our relevance as a political movement. It is a challenge we can only now realistically face as part of a strong and politically united Europe.

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