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CONTRIB 39

BEGELEIDENDE NOTA

van: het secretariaat

aan: de Conventie

Betreft: Bijdrage van mevrouw Riita Korhonen, plaatsvervangend lid van de Conventie

De secretaris-generaal van de Conventie heeft van mevrouw Riita Korhonen, plaatsvervangend lid van de Conventie, de bijdrage ontvangen die in bijlage dezes staat.

Written contribution by MP Riitta Korhonen,
alternate member of the Convention on the Future of the European Union

Europe deserves, and the world needs, a strong and capable Union. What the citizens and businesses expect from the Union are swift decisions, transparency and dialogue and concrete results as the product of the European-wide political process.

To achieve this goal we must find ways to ensure the democracy, effectiveness and transparency of the whole European institutional system. One of the most crucial and urgent questions is the reform of the Council which has been under way for some time and which will hopefully lead to concrete results at the Seville European Council meeting. In the so called Solana process mainly reforms executable without amending the Treaties are being considered. The Convention on the Future of the European Union should as soon as possible consider treaty amending improvements to enhance the functioning of the Council.

First and foremost, these reforms should be effected in a manner that does not furthermore complicate the institutional structure. Secondly, there is also a need to tread a fine line between placing more authority on some Member States and watering down the ambitions and objectives of the Union so that the other, provisionally weakened Member States are not threatened by this transfer of leverage to the few.

Much criticism, some of it more than justified, has been directed at the Rotating Council Presidency. Critics have stated that the six-month presidencies have institutionalised discontinuity in the European Union. They have also noted that the burden of the said task has grown more strenuous. This is because of the broadened agenda of the Union and the huge demands the presidency places on Member State governments. Some have pointed out that in an enlarged Union the Presidency would come too infrequently for most countries' liking.

As a solution some have advocated a Team or Group Presidency. Most proposals have lacked substance, i.e. what this would mean in practical terms. The abandonment of the current system would definitely require amending the Treaties. In my view the Convention should consider this question as promptly as possible because of its paramount importance.

We must also bear in mind the advantages of the current system, which I find to be quite numerous. Firstly, the Rotating Council Presidency is the most visible expression of the fact that the political leadership of the Union lies with the Member States. Every member state - large or small - has an equal stake in running the Union. Secondly, it enables the Council to exercise day-to-day functions without too much fuss. Thirdly, the educational value of holding the Presidency is enormous. This fact alone is a strong argument for the present system in an enlarged Union. The new Member States would benefit greatly from the experience.

I find myself agreeing with MEP Jacques F. Poos, who - as rapporteur on Reform of the Council ¹ - stated on the principle of Rotating Council Presidency that:

"The equality of Member States does not allow this principle to be called into question."

Albeit this has been a brief and sketchy examination, it seems to suggest that one of the biggest problems afflicting the work of the Council is the lack of a longer planning period than the six months provided by a Presidency. The current system creates artificial peaks of activity and promotes stillborn national hobby-horse schemes. But it does not establish or deliver strategic objectives.

The European Union would be better served by replacing the individual Presidency Work Programmes with a jointly agreed multiyear Work Programme. This reform - especially if this European platform programme can be merged with the Annual Policy Strategy of the Commission or better still with such a document as the Strategic Objectives 2000-2005: "Shaping the New Europe"² - would guarantee sufficiently long term programming of the agenda of the European Union. The jointly agreed schemes and projects would be guaranteed funding and support. They would not be left in limbo after the presidency which advocated them has stepped down.

In its recent conclusions ³, the General Affairs Council echoed its support for such a reform:

"The Council welcomed the opportunity provided by the presentation of the Annual Policy Strategy to pursue dialogue on strategic planning and programming. Taking into account the priorities defined by the European Council, it confirmed the need for reinforced programming of EU activities and the timely identification of political priorities for an enlarged European Union. In this connection, the Council invited the Presidency and the Secretary General of the Council to reflect on the possibility of addressing this issue in the context of the report on Council reforms to be submitted to the Seville European Council."

With this new European platform programme we should explore different ways to improve the ability of the Council Secretariat to better assist the Presidencies, find new ways to enhance the synergy between the Secretariat and Member State Presidency apparatus. One is reminded of the excellent recommendation made in the Report of the European Parliament on council reform that:

"The "European education" of national officials should be encouraged by promoting periods of professional experience for them in the General Secretariat of the Council."

Perhaps such activity could form an integral part of the early preparations undertaken by Member States to hold the Presidency. It would guarantee more resources for the Council Secretariat.

¹ A5-0308/2001

² COM(2000)154 final

³ 8649/02 (13.5.2002)

If, on the other hand, some sort of Team Presidency should prevail, the reform should be linked with the future determination of the composition of the Commission. If in the future the Commission is composed of fewer members than there are Member States, the Council chairmanships should be allocated to those Member States without Commissioners. This would offset the public appearance of powerlessness of those Member States.

The number of sectoral formations of the Council is still too excessive. We should find ways to redistribute their competences to a restricted number of specialised Councils responsible for preparing formal decision-making and not for taking legislative decisions themselves. With the simplification of the Treaties, the main challenge for this Convention, the number of instruments available to the Community to implement competences should be reduced - even if this is a taunting exercise. We should also examine the modification of the existing pillar structure and - if deemed appropriate - harmonise the legal effects and instruments in this structure.

The benefit of greater public understanding of Community acts and legislation is an enticing prospect. Because of its history, the Union today has cumulated too incoherent and multifaceted compilation of founding treaties, which is almost incomprehensible to the public. The decision-making system is far too complex for citizens to understand. Bureaucratic practices and legislative and administrative procedures do not follow the axioms of transparency. These are but some of things we need to do away with in order to restore faith in the European project.