

## **European Convention, 6-7 June 2002**

### **Role of National Parliaments**

#### **Written Contribution of Mr Ray MacSharry, Irish Government Representative**

- It is very important that in the Convention there is a recognition of the role national parliaments should play in the overall structures of the Union. I believe that one of the striking features of our debates so far has been the extent of agreement on this point.
- Given that a core function of the Convention is to bring the Union closer to its citizens, the central importance of national parliaments is obvious. In each of our countries, national parliaments have a particular role in connecting the public which elects them to the wider political debate. They enjoy a particularly strong and direct form of democratic legitimacy. This is of special relevance when it comes to reinforcing the legitimacy and accountability of a Union which is too often seen as remote.
- As is recognised in the Secretariat paper and in some other contributions, one of the key roles of national parliaments is to foster debate and enhance accountability at the national level. In recognition of this, a much enhanced system of scrutiny of EU matters is being introduced into our own newly-elected parliament, as recommended by the National Forum on Europe and by the Joint Committee on European Affairs.
- While how our parliaments organise scrutiny arrangements is entirely a matter for national competence, and I agree that there would be merit in the fuller and more systematic exchange of information on how current systems work, with a view to identifying best practice. It is important that we look not just at arrangements as they are set out on paper, but that there is an effort to gauge their practical effectiveness.
- However, beyond the domestic level, there is a need to enhance the role of national parliaments within the Union's own architecture. On the whole, I do not believe that the current decision-making arrangements, in which each of the institutions has its

own role, should be fundamentally altered. But this should not exclude greater visibility for and participation by national parliamentarians acting collectively.

- There is a need to revisit the Protocol on the Role of National Parliaments agreed at Amsterdam. I would support the creation of a reformed and re-energised body bringing together national parliamentarians on a regular basis, with a clearer mandate to debate issues of concern and with the right to question the Commission and the Presidency. This would be particularly important in respect of issues in the second and third pillars, in which the role of national governments remains especially crucial and which are of particular domestic sensitivity.
  - Such a body might also have a role in monitoring and enforcing the principle of subsidiarity. While this question is to be the subject of detailed examination by a working group, I am strongly attracted by the idea of involving national parliamentarians in the process, in particular at an early stage after the tabling of a proposal.
  - In my view, there is also a strong case for involving national parliaments in the selection of the President of the Commission. Detailed consideration of institutional questions is for later in our deliberations. However, giving national parliaments a role would help to reinforce the public sense of the Commission's legitimacy, without unduly upsetting the current institutional balance. For instance, candidates for the position of President might be required to speak and answer questions before national parliaments. Parliaments might also collectively constitute an electoral college for the purposes of electing a President.
  - These ideas are for further discussion, but I believe they merit close consideration in due course.
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