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[Comment] How to fight the far right

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - Two parallel developments in the European Parliament this month reveal much about the state of European democracy.

First of all, there is the "Fair Chair" campaign of Jens Peter Bonde MEP. He ran for the post of president of the European Parliament on a platform of fairness for all political groups. He complained that the most influential posts and the speaking time were being carved up between the two biggest groups, and that this was unfair on the rest. (He comes from a smaller group himself.)

A particular demand of his was that the president of the Parliament should be above party politics rather than representing a particular political group. Of course, any candidate for president will be likely to come from a group to start with, but if elected should resign from that group and act in a neutral manner instead. The management of business in the European Parliament should not be a place for party political fights and seeking party political advantage.

The second development was the creation of a far right group, Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty (ITS), with the arrival of Romanian and Bulgarian MEPs in Strasbourg and Brussels. Prior to the latest accession, the far right was too small to form a group of its own: it needed 19 MEPs from five different countries. Now, it is big enough to establish a group, with all the expectations of posts and speaking time that follow.

What makes these two issues connect – they intersect, perhaps, rather than run in parallel – was the reaction by Martin Schulz MEP, leader of the socialist group. He has suggested that the rest of the parliament should try and prevent the ITS from acquiring the privileges that they would otherwise expect as a group.

While the normal allocation of posts might entitle them to nominate some vice-chairs of committees, each such nomination has to be approved by the committee itself. A majority of members opposed to the ITS could vote down each of its nominations. This would in effect turn the way in which EP business is managed into a party political issue, exactly what Jens Peter Bonde was campaigning against.

What to do? How are MEPs to express their opposition to the policies and values of the far right? By accepting ITS nominations, perhaps they are allowing these ideas to gain a profile and credibility that they would not otherwise have. It is a dilemma.

The answer to this dilemma reveals a lot about the European Union. The crucial point is that there is a difference between being in parliament and being in government.

There should be no question of forming any kind of cooperation with the far right when it comes to working on legislation. A group that fundamentally objects to the values of the European Union can have no role in defining and implementing the expression of those values. So, when it comes to choosing who should govern, there should be no tolerance for the far right.

However, the choice of who should govern comes round only every five years. After the next European elections, a new Commission will have to be chosen. Every time in the past – and I am sure this will be true in 2009, too – members of the Commission come from different political groups. Those political groups should not include the ITS.

But in the meantime, it is the role of the European Parliament to represent the citizens. If some citizens have voted for the far right, however regrettable that might be, those citizens have the right to be represented in the Parliament.

One weakness of the EU institutions is that the notion of the separation of powers is not as strong as it should be. By understanding the difference between the role of the executive (no place for the far right) and that of the legislature (the citizens decide who is a member), that separation can become stronger.

A final point: the real threat from the far right is not in the meeting rooms of the European Parliament but in the cities and towns of the European Union itself. That is where the fight back should be concentrated. A specific concrete measure that would help in that fight would be to bring the Charter of Fundamental Rights into legal force.

At present, while national governments are subject to human rights provisions, the European level of government is not. Correcting this error would be a powerful signal of the European commitment to solidarity and equality; more powerful, may I say, than manoeuvring to keep a far right MEP out of an EP committee vice-chairmanship.

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