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“The Relevance of the EU”

The European Union is often accused of all kinds of evils. The substantial criticism tends to concentrate on its ‘democratic deficit, that is, the distance that separates the Union’s institutions from European citizens. The EU, a similar line of argument goes, is irrelevant to most peoples’ everyday lives and fails to make a positive difference to things that matter to them, such as unemployment, crime or the environment. In fact, in those occasions where it is seen as active it is for all the wrong reasons (such as its admittedly bizarre interest in regulating the shape of cucumbers sold in the EU market). Euroscepticism has become more popular, as the policy-making capacities of the Union have expanded and as its internal diversity has grown through successive waves of enlargement.

They come in different shapes and exist in all member states, candidate countries and beyond, but the core argument of Eurosceptics is pretty much standard. States are, or ought to be, the masters of peoples’ destiny, and supranational institutions of the EU cannot claim credit for Europe’s achievements. Last week’s events confirmed how wrong they are.

After the adoption of the maximum 48-hour working week through a 1993 Council Directive, exceptions have been made for some member states leading to inequity in the Directive’s application. The UK and some other member states had secured an opt-out from the Directive, allowing under circumstances a working week of up to 65 hours. Following a Commission proposal of 2004 proposals, the Council adopted a position last summer that would maintain the opt-out.

EU institutions have ever since 1993 been reformed; the European Parliament in particular has become a co-legislator, along with the Council, on issues such as working time. This is down to successive revisions of the European Union’s functions through Treaty revisions (Maastricht in 1991, Amsterdam in 1997 and so on). Last week, the newly empowered European Parliament voted in favour a substantially revised version of the Council’s adopted plan. According to most MEPs (421 votes to 273), the special opt-out rights secured by the UK and Central and East European member states on working time limits should be scrapped and hours on duty should be calculated as working hours. The debate on regulating working time in Europe will now continue, and the opt-out will remain a point of political contention.

Protest in Brussels against the Council’s position has been vocal and sustained, culminating in a sizeable demonstration days before the Parliament’s deliberations. Quite clearly, many Europeans realize that EU decisions on matters such as working time have a clear effect on their everyday living standards. Far from irrelevant, the EU is today part of the solution to common problems.

The Union has shown in the working time saga its ability to reform its institutions towards a positive direction. What originally was a consultative Assembly has become, through successive Treaty revisions and a lot of hard work, a co-legislator on EU affairs. Its decision last week enhances its legitimacy as a democratically elected, legitimate and relevant EU institution responsive to popular concerns.

What will now follow is a conciliation process aiming at bringing Council and Parliament views closer together. It is to be hoped that a successful compromise will be found, although the

distance currently separating the Council from the Parliament is substantial. States such as the UK are unlikely to accept the withdrawal of the opt-out.

Still, Europe has shown that it can have a political debate, and that decisions are not always taken behind closed doors. MEPs have justified their vote on explicitly political grounds, and those supportive of the Parliament's vote have underlined the significance of maintaining equitable standards throughout the Community. In the context of a severe economic crisis leading to mass layoffs, the notion that some should work 65 hours a week and others not at all is justifiably unwelcome.

The activism that the European Parliament has shown is an added argument in favour of high participation in the EU elections scheduled for next summer. The working time debate is a clear message to Eurosceptics: the EU and its institutions are not only relevant, but adaptable and useful.

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