



## **"50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the European Parliament - achievements and future challenges; a perspective from the Lisbon Treaty"**

When browsing the press articles concerning the European Parliament one can find that it is often labelled as “the travelling circus”, mainly because it does not have a permanent residence in one city. But why the term “circus”?

If we name an important European institution a “travelling circus” we automatically seem to diminish its role and influence. But why do we, the European citizens, attach to it this negative label, especially now when it turned fifty? It is because the European Parliament can be compared to a circus in terms of colour, exoticism, sadness and happiness, noisy and silence, diversity and seriousness? In some ways we can say that the big arena of the European Circus is reflected in this institution... and we want this reflection to grow, to become more accurate. “Unity in Diversity” - this is what the European Union promotes nowadays. Just like a circus that travels all over the world with its men and beasts, with its multitude of lights and shadows, this is how the European Parliament looks like – diverse but unified.

Looking into the history of our *travelling circus*, we see that it has developed alongside with the growth of the *big circus*. The *big circus* was the European Coal and Steel Community, and it has had, from 1952, a *Common Assembly*, with 78 members from the national parliaments with consultative prerogatives. The ECSC Treaty says that it is formed from the “representatives of the people”, allowing for direct elections. After signing the Treaty of Rome, its name changed to the *European Parliament Assembly*. From then on, the little circus with a provincial look started growing. After discussions and demonstrations for direct election, the members of the European Parliament directly elected took their places in 1979. There is no distinction between men and women in the circus when they go into the arena and similarly, our circus democratically elected Simone Veil as its president. And of course, they started working harder and harder with the beasts of Eurosclerosis, European Budget, Expansion, Integration, and the Clowns of National Pride. The great acrobat Altiero Spinelli designed in 1984 the plan that bears his name and its ideas contributed to the creation of the European Union as it is today. The Single European Act of 1985 extended the powers held by the European Parliament and so did the Maastricht Treaty of 1991 and the



Amsterdam Treaty of 1997. Our circus has started from that moment to use its powers. In 1999, the European Parliament forced the resignation of the Santer Commission. It had had refused to approve the budget over allegations of fraud and poor management in the Commission. The crisis ended in Commission resigning in the face of an impending censure from the Parliament. In 2004, the Parliament again exerted great pressure on the European Commission. The members of our travelling circus raised doubts about some nominees and the Civil Liberties Committee rejected the person proposed for the post of Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security (Rocco Buttiglione). All the people, no matter of skin colour or sexual orientation, are welcomed in the *Big Circus* of the European Union, so a commissioner has to be opened-minded when it comes to the question of homosexuality. It was the first time the Parliament ever voted against a Commissioner. Some other commissioners also had to be withdrawn (or reassigned) before the European Parliament allowed the Barroso Commission to take office.

Our *travelling circus* has supervisory power, it is a 'watching dog' of the *big circus*. Every European citizen has the right to petition Parliament to ask for problems to be remedied in areas within the sphere of activity of the European Union. Parliament has also appointed an Ombudsman, who deals with complaints by individuals against Community institutions or bodies with a view to reaching an amicable solution. The *travelling circus* is the voice of the poor, of the little, of the many ordinary people of the *big circus*. The European Parliament also has the power to set up a committee of inquiry to look into violations or wrong application of Community law by Member States. And, of course, the European Parliament has the great power of control in the monetary and financial domain. If money makes the world go round, the *travelling circus* has the greatest hoopers watch!

The European Parliament exercises democratic control over the European Commission and there is also a certain parliamentary oversight over the activities of the European Council. Our *travelling circus* always pays attention to the functioning of the other important bodies of the *big circus*.

In the *travelling circus*, important people from the *big circus* and from all over the world come to talk about European and international problems. World leaders flock to address the European Parliament. In this way, the *travelling circus* is an international forum. Over the years, Parliament has become a focus for presenting the internal and external activities of the European Union. Members of Parliament – and, through them, the citizens from the *big circus* – can be involved in marking out their political vision for Europe and, why not, for the world.

Our circus grew incessantly because the European Circus constantly welcomed new states under its blue flag. That is why the Treaty of Nice of 2002, accepting a framework for the coming enlargement, imposed a cap on the number of members to be elected, 732 (but since January 1<sup>st</sup> 2007, there have been 785).



There are 99 Germans and 5 Maltese (on the 7<sup>th</sup> place is now Romania with 35 representatives). Each Member State has a fixed numbers of members, based on the size of its population but in the arena the Parliamentary groups are not based on nationality but on their political views.

After the tragic death of the European Constitution (vetoed in two of the countries that were at the basis of the Union, France and the Netherlands) the new treaty of Lisbon (known as the *Reform Treaty*) was signed at the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 2007 and is now in the full process of being ratified by the Member States. Under the provisions of this treaty our *travelling circus* is, by all means, a European circus. Therefore, we now have a bi-cameral legislature: the European Parliament and the Council. As the article 9a states, this two shall jointly exercise legislative and budgetary functions. It shall exercise functions of political control and consultation as laid down in the Treaties. The Parliament shall elect the President of the Commission.

This means that our *travelling circus* contributes, by its activity, to the improvement of the democracy of the European Union. By extending co-decision procedure with the Council to new areas of policy its role of a real Parliament as we know it from our national parliaments is stronger. Co-decision gives the same weight to the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union on a wide range of areas (for example, transport, the environment and consumer protection). Two thirds of European laws are adopted jointly by the European Parliament and the Council. Furthermore, the Parliament has the right to consent to a Council measure (or not) in the few remaining areas (those “special legislative procedures”), with few exceptions.

The European Parliament also gains greater power over the entire EU budget, not just non-compulsory expenditure. Now, in the case of ‘compulsory expenditure’ (such as agricultural expenditure and expenditure linked to international agreements) it is the Council that has the last word. Rules say that in the case of ‘non-compulsory expenditure’ (other expenditure) Parliament decides in close collaboration with the Council. The European Parliament and the Council must adhere to the annual spending limits laid down in the multi-annual financial perspective.

This treaty also sets the number of the representatives: 750 plus the president. Also, the minimum seats in the Parliament for a Member state is 6 instead of 5 and the maximum is 96 instead of 99, with basic rules concerning their distribution (if new states join the EU or some want to leave it, now this thing being stated in the treaty). These basic rules on the distribution of seats in the Parliament made the process easier, rather than them being negotiated at each enlargement. Decisions about the composition of the Parliament are currently made by the Council. This would remain so but the decision would be made based on a proposal from the Parliament itself.



Therefore, our *travelling circus* is still... travelling. The protocol attached to the Treaty of Amsterdam requires that 12 plenary sessions are to be held in Strasbourg, the official seat, but extra part sessions as well as committee meetings are to be held in Brussels. The Secretariat is still hosted by Luxembourg. If we look at the building in Strasbourg, it is the perfect place for the circus due to its shape. But one million citizens who enjoy the circus and are concerned by the money spent on it (and its image) democratically proposed a single seat, in Brussels.

The main important thing is though the activity of our *travelling circus*. It evolved from a rather second hand institution with consultative prerogative to a real Parliament. The treaty of Lisbon has reformed this institution. In addition to the institutional reforms brought by the Treaty of Lisbon, in 2007 the President set up the *Special Working Group on Parliamentary Reform* to improve the efficiency and image of the Parliament. Some ideas include livening up the plenary sessions and a State of the Union debate (like in the Unites States). This thing shows that the *travelling circus* is capable of looking in its own arena, see what the show needs to be even better and taking the necessary measures to do the job in a democratic way.

From what it has been presented so far we can say that our circus is a democratic institution through the way of selecting the representatives (free direct elections), organisation (not on nationality grounds but on political orientation), activity, powers. What would be the future of it?

First of all, this democratisation from the Treaty of Lisbon has to be recognized by the Member States. Ratification could be a problem if we keep in mind what happened to the European Constitution. However, the prognosis looks good now. Secondly, the main problems our circus will have to face are the problems of the *big circus*, of the European Union. That means the ways in which it will deal with the enlargement, with the economical problems in an interdependent world, globalisation, terrorism and ecological problems.

Our *travelling circus* is the voice of the people, no matter what language they speak. Our *travelling circus* can fight the beasts from within and repel the beasts of outside. Children enjoy most the circus and we are the children of Europe. We are prepared to laugh and keep our breath when the lions show up, we are innocent and a little far from the real problems of our big circus, attracted by glamour and noise and sometimes ready to go down in the arena and make a difference. However, if we watch the show, if we pay the ticket and express our feelings towards the show, it will go on and our circus will continue to exist and flourish.