

'The British "green and white" paper on European elections' from Europe (4.-5. April 1977)

Caption: In his editorial of 4-5 April 1977, Emanuele Gazzo, Editor-in-Chief of Agence Europe, comments on some of the proposals contained in the British white paper on the voting procedure to be applied in the United Kingdom for the first direct elections to the European Parliament.

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[http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_british_"green_and_white"_paper_on_european_elections_from_europe_4_5_april_1977-en-f11f6270-fadc-4362-942d-e8bbe8d1bdd2.html](http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_british_)

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The British "green and white" paper on European elections

The publication of the British "White Paper" on the European elections is a very important event because on the one hand, it should rapidly lead to an open debate and should make it possible to determine whether one may still reckon on the European elections taking place on the scheduled date of May-June 1978, and on the other, it clearly sets out the pros and cons of each of the alternative arguments on the important points to be decided. The "White Paper", which the British describe as "almost green" because it does not contain any formal proposals, but suggests alternatives, nevertheless confirms the Government's desire to maintain its commitment regarding the direct elections to the European elections, and to endeavour to respect the scheduled date of May-June 1978.

Let us recognize first of all that this "objective statement" of the positive or negative elements of each of the solutions envisaged for the procedure to be adopted for the European elections is not merely inspired by a democratic conscience, which must nevertheless be admired. It is also - and in fact, above all - due to the fact that the Government itself, like the party which supports it, is deeply divided, and it contains a certain number of after-thoughts and calculations of a purely electoral nature. To spell out the situation as it exists, if the White Paper, although objectively neutral, does show a certain preference for a proportional system based on regional lists, with the possibility of expressing preference for a certain candidate, that is the result of two considerations of a tactical nature. The first is that Labour realizes that if the system used for the Westminster elections (the "first past the post system", i.e. a simple majority system) were to be applied to the European elections in the near future, Labour representation would be drastically reduced. The second is that, for similar reasons, in accordance with their doctrine, the Liberals ask that the European elections should take the form of a proportional system, and the support of the Liberals is indispensable if the Callaghan Government is to survive.

As we have said, the White Paper makes no choices. It sets out the different arguments and asks that a debate be held, in Parliament and elsewhere, so that appropriate conclusions may be drawn. It indicates that the choice of a voting system should be made between: (a) the system currently employed; (b) a system of proportional representation with a national list or several regional lists; (c) the "transferable vote" system which makes it possible to vote directly for candidates in different parties. Finally, it raises the problem of the dual mandate.

While it is designed to be perfectly objective, the White Paper issues a warning where the PR (proportional representation) system is concerned: "To abandon our traditional method in this way would be a major constitutional innovation, the consequences of which are difficult to see". It points out that in any event, the elections in Northern Ireland would use the proportional system. It also indicates that a regional list system would be preferable to a national list system. And it adds that such a system "would bring the United Kingdom into line with most of its European partners". Which points to a remarkable degree of concern for European solidarity.

"It is significant that, at the time of the publication of the White Paper, the majority of the most authoritative commentaries in the British press have in no way hesitated. Practically all indicate the system of proportional representation based on regional lists, with the possibility of an individual preference vote, as the most suitable system. It is along these lines, although perhaps with some modifications, that David Wood in the "Times", "Financial Times" and "Sunday Times" editorials and, in an excellent analysis of the vicissitudes of democracy in Britain and Europe, John Cole in the "Observer", expressed their views. In stating their preference for this method (which Michael Steed of the University of Manchester had analysed from all points of view, as indicated by EUROPE), the "Times" observes that a "national" list is not seriously envisaged "because it would involve voting for parties rather than individuals". There would be 11 regional constituencies in the United Kingdom, each comprising between 3 and 11 seats, which would ensure fairly close contacts between the electors and those elected.

A British decision along these lines would be of very great importance: since this constitutes an effort to draw closer to the systems in force in Continental Europe, it should be accompanied by a similar, symmetrical effort by the United Kingdom's partners. Above all, this effort should concern the exclusion of

"national" lists, which give the chiefs-of-staff of the parties a free-hand and run the risk of contradicting what is wanted: to lead to a popular movement for Europe. The creation of more restricted constituencies, with a limited number of candidates, and the possibility of the elector awarding a preferential vote to a candidate of his choice (outside the party), would be a democratic and modern answer to the challenge of the European elections.

Em. G.