Strasbourg from 1979

Europe was so different in those first 10 years of the European Parliament. We had no reason to suppose that the Iron Curtain would ever disappear. Although the Cold War, frightening at times, was coming to an end — with Star Wars, Ronald Reagan abetted by Margaret Thatcher had turned it into an economic more than a military confrontation — the 40-year-old division of East and West [of Berlin, of Germany, of Austria-Hungary, of Europe] seemed permanent. We all lived next to a gigantic prison.

This was the decade which ended with the Pan-European Picnic at Sopron, the escape of 661 East Germans, and the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. I cherish a real piece of the Iron Curtain — a few inches of barbed wire — which Walburga brought home.

Otto von Habsburg and I were both elected as MEPs in 1979 to the first elected European Parliament. He seized the opportunity of this new but untried theatre and used it superbly to challenge the negative thinking about the East — even though many back in the 1980s thought the hope of a reunited, democratic Europe any time soon was either unrealistic or plain stupid.

This was the decade that saw Russian aggression in Afghanistan; the European Currency Unit (the ECU) started the slow development into the Euro and, with the Economic and Monetary Union, the Single Currency. In the EP, we planned and pushed for the Single Market. Today's European Union, once the European Common Market, was still the European [Economic] Community of 12 nations. The Maastricht Treaty, which established the European Union in 1991, was still to come.

It was in those years that the EP became important in ways unintended by those who framed its constitution: its benches contain, and contained no government as such: The Council of Ministers made the decisions; the Commission in Brussels made the proposals; we could only draw up reports expressing our opinions. [True, we did have some power over the budget]. We suddenly discovered that, by withholding our opinion on a Commission proposal, it could not go forward for Council approval. It was a short step towards changing a proposal and daring the Council to accept the changes.
We had power, after all.

However, there was a subtler consequence of establishing a common parliament in that symbolic place, Strasbourg, where French and German frontiers met. If anyone — any statesman, president, human rights activist, trouble-maker — wanted to speak to all of Europe, here was the finest platform, a continental forum more focused than the United Nations in New York. What other single place could fighters for liberty like Sakharov come to, to be heard? When the Falklands War broke out in 1982, here was where Europe rallied loudest in Britain's support. From here was launched the mightiest condemnation of Russia's invasion of Afghanistan. Here were sounded the most effective appeals for the release of Nelson Mandela.

And that was the significance of Otto von Habsburg's call for a symbolic empty chair to be placed in the plenary chamber for an annual debate on foreign policy — a reminder that the

Europe of the Yalta agreement (by Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt in 1945) was temporary and that there would be room for all Eastern Europe people when they were set free. The proposition was scorned by many on the Left in the Parliament — how easy it was to scoff that attendance was often so poor we didn't need any more empty seats. But east of the Iron Curtain, the people heard, took notice, and took heart. Europe had spoken.

Otto von Habsburg had contrived that I should be the rapporteur for this report. I consulted him about how to define Europe, especially its eastern borders. "As widely as possible," he said at once. That included Russia as far as the Urals, but Turkey remained a grey area as ever.
Indeed — where does Asia start?

The early Strasbourg parliaments were also where national statesmen, out of power at home, could meet privately. Some used it as a sort of garage. Mr Chirac was a member for a matter of months. So was Willi Brandt. I recall seeing a historic trio — a Bismarck, a Habsburg, and Signor Rumor — all hobnobbing together.

Otto von Habsburg was an extraordinary man. His oratorical command of language was tremendous — he spoke at least eight tongues fluently (if you count Latin), and it was widely believed he spoke every one of the old Habsburg empire.

And he was such a good friend. He came to Scotland to speak to my electorate there — and overwhelmed them with his charm and humour. And he came again, to London, where I was also a candidate. He had a presence and a modesty that commanded total respect, admiration and affection.

Adam Fergusson, June 2024