

## **Presentation by Andreas Gross of the report by the Political Affairs Committee and of the opinions**

The core of human rights is dignity. There is no worthier existence unless an individual can take charge of himself. Thus democracy too is a human right and not a privilege of any citizen. There is no dignified existence without the possibility of walking upright, which cannot be done without having the right of self-determination.

Democracy, though, is more than a human right. It is a patchwork made from many thousands of single pieces which signify the quality of democracy only when put together. And it is singular how we, though in a home of democracy here, have evolved criteria through history for assessing human rights but hitherto virtually no criteria for assessing the democracy that proceeds from human rights.

May I say quite candidly that I sometimes think we are more of a hospital than a home for democracy! That would actually not be so bad, since we all need to become wiser and healthier, and the President too writes in his preface that democracy is an eternal learning process. But it should also be realised that nobody is so completely healthy that he cannot become healthier, and sometimes this self-criticism is lacking in my opinion.

There is nobody here who would not claim to be a democrat. Yet back home, if we were to enquire among the citizens (and this report is written very much from their point of view, for the quality of democracy is determined in that grassroots perspective, not in the perspective of the citizens' elected representatives and civil society), hardly anyone would not be disappointed with the quality of our democracy.

It is one of the three greatest paradoxes of our time that never yet have so many people lived under a democracy, but hardly ever were so many disappointed in it. Another paradox is the fact that since democracy prevailed as the one source of legitimate political power, which did not occur definitively and universally until about 16 years ago, and since politicians have ceased denying they are democrats, democracy has been particularly weak and its proneness to crisis has become plain.

To realise this one must hark back to the origins, in modern society clearly the American and French Revolutions, which had much to do with each other. For example, Thomas Paine and Condorcet were figures in both these revolutions, and the French people's Declaration of the Rights of Man was the first standard text for democracy.

Looking at what is really meant by democracy, we perceive that democracy signifies far more than the four-yearly choice between politicians, between Pepsi Cola and Coca Cola as it were. Freedom is much more than choosing between elites. Democracy and freedom mean that together we can exert influence on the foundations of our life.

Democracy makes available the rights, procedures and institutions with which the conflicts that necessarily occur can be settled as far as possible without violence. And whenever violence arises, whether overtly or covertly, then there is something wrong with democracy. That is an unmistakable sign of the quality of democracy.

Democratic power is the ability, the right and the will to exert an influence on one's own existence in conjunction with others. Life is not predestination, that was also the great watchword of the French Revolution. And representation, that is choosing those like us who represent the people in parliament, was only a prop for the attainment of democracy, not its sole component. The fact that this system is at present regarded as the only one constitutes one of the chief problems and manifestations of crisis in democracy.

This is the second major paradox: the fine British magazine "The Economist" – not a left-wing paper, as you know – has said that 200 years ago representation was quite certainly the most important thing because then many people could not read and write and were not sufficiently well-informed to take control of their own lives. Even today representatives are still needed; that is altogether correct.

Yet today the distinction between who is represented and who represents is practically nil. There are even many citizens of both sexes who in certain realms of our society are better-informed than we

politicians. That is the second paradox, constituting the frustration over democracy of which I spoke at the beginning. In society there are surplus abilities and know-how of which the institutions do not avail themselves.

Democratic institutions do not allow society to realise its own potential; this frustrates many because they could do much more than merely elect representatives. Therefore it is a perspective of the report that in our own countries, above and beyond elections, we must broaden people's mandatory rights of participation at all levels – national, regional and local. Beyond, not versus, election; still, an election is not the single moment of freedom. We are not free only on the Sunday when we go to the polls, but also on weekdays and every day for four years.

The third major paradox, which makes democracy's proneness to crisis plain today, is that democracy is much more than an abacus, much more than rights and procedures; it is also a promise that opportunities in life will be equally apportioned, that nobody will come off too badly as Mr Glesener of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee put it. But to make this possible, democracy and economy must operate on the same level.

Today democracy resembles a ship's rudder, so short that it does not reach the water. Some say that, such being the case, the rudder can straightway be discarded on the dunghill of history, while others say that the rudder should be lengthened. Therefore transnational democracy is urgently needed as the prerequisite for civilising markets and the economy in the interests of humanity.

Indeed, democracy also stands for the representation of the common interest, of the common good, and we should consider this a second perspective. We must democratise Europe. Europe needs democracy as much as democracy needs Europe. And if we do both these things, enhance democracy at home and broaden it nationally, we shall be able both at home and in the Council of Europe to ensure that democracy finds the way out of the crisis and that we can regain the confidence of people who today have no more confidence in us.