

EU split over how far transparency should go in meetings

14/06/2006

The European Union is split over opening its meetings to the public eye as concerns grow that cameras will only push sensitive debates into back rooms and backfire against greater transparency.

Although there are no plans to let journalists film at will, the EU's Austrian presidency is to propose to EU leaders at a summit Thursday and Friday to let official cameras record the entirety of ministers' decision-making meetings.

Austria is also to suggest to leaders, many of whom have vowed to explain better to citizens how the EU works, that debates judged to be of particular importance to citizens should also be filmed. The proceedings would then be played in nearby press rooms or over the Internet.

Only two weeks ago, all EU countries were ready to sign on to the proposals, encouraged by the bloc's Scandinavian members, which have long championed the transparency cause.

However, reticence from Britain since then has fuelled broader opposition to greater openness even though London urged more transparency in the EU's dealings when it held the bloc's presidency in the second half of 2005.

Recently Britain's new foreign secretary, Margaret Beckett, has backed away from the idea of making meetings more open to the public on the grounds that talks are often too sensitive.

"One thing I think people are overlooking, not only do we sometimes have difficult and delicate negotiations internationally within the EU, we have negotiations with others on a global scale, for example in world trade talks," she said Monday in Luxembourg.

"You really don't want the European Union to be discussing our bottom line in negotiations in front of all the people with whom we're going to negotiate," she added.

Britain's recent reserves have caused cracks in the consensus in favour of greater openness by encouraging other countries, such as Belgium, France, Slovenia and Spain, to come out with their own concerns.

"We were quite nervous that people might say, 'what's the matter with you, you changed your mind', but in fact we found that quite a few member states came out acknowledging that 'yes, we share your concerns' after we said we had concerns," a British source said.

Some countries are worried that letting the cameras roll might encourage more backroom deals or some ministers to refuse to budge on the positions because of pressure back home.

One diplomat said: "There are two results from the cameras: either the politicians don't say anything anymore during the official sessions and discussions take place in the corridors, or they stand before the cameras and stick to their national position and the debate gets held up.

"In both cases, community spirit is not encouraged," the diplomat added, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Recent discussions that did take place before the cameras, including a debate on the sensitive subject of the liberalization of the EU's service sector, have shown the limits of transparency.

Instead of negotiating before the cameras, the ministers waited for lunch -- which no one has so far proposed to film -- to hammer out a compromise, the diplomat said.

Another diplomat said: "There's a risk that the main discussions are pushed into a more restricted forum with perhaps fewer member states present."

As a result, only the Austrians, whose agenda for the summit is short of concrete proposals, are betting on an easy adoption of the proposals.

See: <http://www.eubusiness.com/Institutions/060614110632.t6xp3mvm>

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