EU Legitimacy and new Forms of Citizen Engagement

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to review the arguments and examine the case for the legitimacy of the European Union (EU) and its institutions. In terms of the scope of the paper the author sought to, examine the literature in this area, engage with current issues, and speak with practitioners. This paper was written in the months leading up to the 2009 elections to the European Parliament. A number of interviews were done including two Irish members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who were standing for re-election at the time. This was done to ground some of the ideas brought forward by the literature in the experience of those most directly involved. The paper goes on to look at some of the approaches to democratising the EU such as the way in which the EU has used information and communication technologies (ICT) to connect with the citizens of Europe. The author concludes that, while the EU does not conform to ideal models of legitimacy and accountability, it is evolving in that direction and a case can be made that the EU is at least as accountable as the nation states of which it is composed. It is also the view of the author that developments in social networking and virtual environments, offer states and politicians the opportunity to better engage with citizens and contribute to the speed of this evolution.

Keywords: e-government, e-consultation, European Union, democratic deficit, legitimacy, cyberparliament

1. Introduction

Political power has been defined by Beetham (1998) as legitimate if three conditions are met. Firstly, that power is acquired and exercised according to established rules. Secondly, that the rules are justifiable according to accepted beliefs about the source of authority and standards of government. Thirdly, that the positions of authority are confirmed by the consent of those subordinate to them and recognised by other legitimate authorities. The legality of the Union is not in question, nor the recognition of the Union. Rather it is the degree to which the European Union (EU) meets the standard of legitimacy in terms of the justifiability of the system of governance in relation to accepted norms, and the degree to which it meets normative standards of governance. The accepted norms of governance leads us to another contestable concept, that of accountability. Bovens (2007), claims that accountability is dependent on an actor, a forum for judgement, and an obligation to explain those actions to the forum. This refinement provides a framework by which to judge the institutions of the EU. Does the EU meet normative standards of governance and can therefore be considered legitimate and do the institutions meet the criteria of actor, forum and reporting to meet the criteria of accountability?

The role that technology can play in addressing any perceived legitimacy deficit or lack of accountability will be explored at the conclusion of this paper. The internet has made information more accessible to citizens, allowed greater monitoring of governmental organisations and provided the possibility of greater interaction. Pina et al (2007) conducted an empirical study of the impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) on the national governments of the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and fifteen EU countries. They found the use of ICT in consultation, policy making and deliberative democratic input, beginning to be embraced and the possibility of bringing citizens closer to their governments discernable in the near future. The degree to which ICT offers the various actors of the EU a forum for judgement and an opportunity to explain their actions will be examined later.

2. The legitimacy arguments

Montesquieu, writing in the 18th century saw legitimacy based on the will of the people, the laws of each nation 'should be so proper to the people for whom they are made, that it is only by great chance that those of one nation should be appropriate for another" (Montesquieu 1961:128). This concern that a single set of laws and the lack of homogeneity of the European people is echoed by Moravcsik writing 200 years later. Moravcsik (2002) cites the size of the EU, its distance from the individual citizen and the lack of a common history, culture, or symbolism as a reason for concern. At an institutional level the fact that only one portion of the polity is elected directly and that European elections are not fought on European issues or transnational politics is seen as a further impediment.

The lack of knowledge of the role of the Commission, the growing influence of the European Court of Justice, and the fact that deliberation in the council of ministers is seen as secretive and diplomatic in nature; all contribute to an EU viewed with suspicion by many citizens.

Despite this, Moravcsik argues for the legitimacy and democratic strength of the EU. The EU should not be held to a standard of democracy that does not exist in nation states, most of whom have delegated functions from elected representatives to qangos. For example in Ireland there has been a process of agencifiation which has occurred in the last twenty five years which has seen the number of state agencies grow by more than four hundred. State agencies remain part of the system of government and the government is ultimately responsible for their performance (Dooney & O'Toole 1998: 189). However they have been defined as 'autonomous public bodies, neither temporary in character nor purely advisory in their functions' (FitzGerald 1963:5). Schmitter (1985:33) claims that 'the modern state is an amorphous complex of agencies with ill defined boundaries performing a great variety of not very distinctive functions.' The role of agencies in Ireland is well discussed in Orlaigh Quinn's (2008) book on the subject. If such movements of power and authority from elected representatives raise no concerns of democratic deficit at a national level then it is difficult to sustain the argument that similar delegation of decision making at a European level produces an unacceptable deficit. According to the Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Gay Mitchell, who the author interviewed in March 2009 in the course of preparing this paper:

> *"......the real democratic deficit is between the Dáil and the people not between the European institutions and the people...there is nothing more accessible than the way we do our business in terms of draft directives, directives that are issued, proposals for directives, how they are debated, how they can be accessed by anyone. But in the Dáil they have given away their powers to tribunals, to fora, to commissions to all sorts of people, and they are only left with responsibility and that is wrong."*

The EU retains strong constitutional checks and balances and there is strong, if indirect, democratic control by the nation states. The directly elected European Parliament (EP) is growing in influence and the process of policy making is clear and transparent. The process of enlargement has further promoted democracy by strengthening the moderate centrist parties in the eastern states, thus raising the standard of democracy across Europe. Finally, the regulatory nature of much of the work of the EU may be less interesting to citizens but this does not mean the EU is negatively impacting on debates in the member states. In fact, those who focus on the regulatory model of the EU (Majone 1996) would argue that legitimacy results from outputs and not from the process of achieving the outputs.

Follesdal and Hix (2006) rejected the view that legitimacy is achieved simply if a positive outcome is produced, there must be a link between voter preference and policy outcome. They argue that checks and balance processes are just another version of veto politics which allows single issue groups to block decisions which might benefit the majority. A weakness in the 'democracy' of European Parliament is seen as the lack of an opposition, elections are based not on opposing visions or policies, but on local personalities or issues.

Bovens (2007) describes traditional accountability, where citizens delegate to elected representatives, who in turn delegate to a cabinet of ministers, as vertical accountability. In contrast horizontal accountability as the access citizens have to power via civil forums, clients, administrative forums, ombudsmen, and auditors. Looked at in this way accountability in the EU is 'diagonal' in nature with elements of each system present in its structures.

The argument for a democratic deficit is based on two propositions; a lack of democratic control mechanisms and a general lack of popular support. The problem with approaching legitimacy in this way is that it seeks to impose traditional models of nation-state legitimacy on a transnational institutional structure (Burgess 2002:468). Riekmann's view (2007) is that the EU does not have a system of government but a system of governance and so comparisons with national governments are not useful. Also, *'the legitimacy of the EU is primarily indirect and mediated through national governments that have pooled their sovereignties in order to do collectively what they could not do equally well individually'*(Shackleton and Raunio 2003).

At a meeting in IBEC on the 26th of February 2009, Vice President Gunter Verheugen, Commissioner for Enterprise and Industry, speaking about navigating a path through the difficult economic times said:

> *"Europe should not act in a single or harmonized way, each member must select the best course of action for their circumstances, but Europe must take action in a co-ordinated way so that no harm is caused by the actions of one member to another. In this way it is more important that there is agreement on what not to do and that there is a process to agree these positions"*

This contemporary interpretation of democracy sees legitimacy based on the correct execution of a set of valid procedures (Burgess 2002:472).

For Weber (1972), there are three logics of legitimacy; rational authority based on the legitimacy of the law, traditional authority based on tradition, and charismatic authority based on the legitimacy of an individual leader. In the case of the EU there is no single leader, nor is there sufficient common history yet to the EU as an institution. This leaves us with the legitimacy of, and respect for, the law and by extension the institutions established by the law. The EU's legal authority is based wholly on the circulation of directives, rules and regulations. It is the institutions function to apply those rules and regulations (Burgess 2002:474). For that reason the following section looks at the question of legitimacy in the EU institutions.

3. The accountability of EU institutions

The development of the EU can be mapped out via the series of treaties which established and developed the polity. At each stage the final outcome or destination of the process has been fudged by the member states (Mazey 2001) but the progress toward a more integrated and accountable organisation is consistent.

The three main institutions of the EU have been compared to various national institutions but comparisons are difficult given their uniqueness in the international political landscape. In an interview for this paper in March 2009, MEP for Dublin, Gay Mitchell, likened the European Parliament to the House of Representatives in the US whilst explaining the difficulty in making comparisons with other fora.

> *"...the Parliament is more like a house of representatives than the Dáil. [N.B. The Dáil is the lower house of the Irish Parliament] The difficulty we have is that there is no term for this in political science so people start using old terms for this which do not fit.........we didn't have a blank page on which to write a constitution so by instalments we are agreeing how we will live on this continent together in peace and stability, how we will organise ourselves to live within the continent then as a continent how we will organise ourselves to play a role in the world. ....we are doing that by sort of push and pull we are moving ahead and we are bringing people with us at the same time. I just think the whole thing is a fascinating part of our living history, that this is happening and its happening in a democratic way"*

The Council of ministers represents the governments, the European Parliament represents the people, and the Commission represents Europe. This view is supported by the nature of the appointment of the bodies. The Council are appointed by national governments, the European Parliament by direct election by European citizens, and the Commission by agreement between the other two. An alternate view would be that the Council represents the interests of the member states and the Parliament and Commission represent the centralised power of Europe. This sees the national governments as players in a political game of compromise between national interests and the politics of 'Brussels'. This is a scenario that often plays well with a governments electorate who see their politicians seeking to get what is best for them from 'Brussels'.

Rather than attempting to compare these three European institutions to national institutions it may be useful to look at them in turn and examine the nature of their accountability.

4. Commission

The role of the Commission has no direct comparison at national level. In some ways it acts as a bureaucracy or civil service, in other ways it can appear to have executive functions. The Commission is divided in to twenty seven directorates each responsible for a different policy area and each headed

by a commissioner nominated from a member state. The role of the Commission is to initiate policies, represent the EU, act as guardian of the treaties, ensure the correct application of EU legislation and negotiate international trade agreements.

The power of the Commission rests on its ability to set an agenda. The legitimacy of the Commission rests on a number of arguments. The Commissioners are proposed by the democratically elected governments of their country and approved by the democratically elected European Parliament. Though they are not directly elected to office they retain close links to citizens through civil society organisations, interest groups, trade unions and other lobbying organisations. Saurugger (2008) has analysed the value of interest groups to the development of democracy in the EU. In her view they are of great value in providing citizen initiated policies, providing law makers with information not otherwise available, improving the efficiency of policy making, and assuring citizen involvement. The point is also made that whilst the EU may not have evolved to a government *by* the people and *of* the people, it is certainly government *for* the people and *with* the people. The participation of interest groups increases both the bargaining power and legitimacy of the Commission. Finally, the Commission is a proposer of policy; all proposals are subject to approval by parliament and/or the council. It is these two institutions, with a more direct electoral mandate, who provide the decision making fora for the EU.

5. European Parliament

The European Parliament is directly elected every five years by the citizens of the member states. Meetings of the parliament take place in Strasbourg and Brussels with a secretariat in Luxembourg and Brussels. Some twenty committees do preparatory work in preparation for these plenary sessions. The parliament has 785 seats, grouped by common political outlook rather than by nationality.

The power of the Parliament can be categorised as, scrutiny and control, legislative and budgetary. In regard to the first of these, the Parliament can ask questions of both the Commission and the Council of Ministers, can establish committees of enquiry, and plays a role in the appointment of commissioners who must be approved by the Parliament before appointment. In extremis, the entire team of commissioners can be removed by the Parliament, and although this has never happened, it has come close on one occasion where the commissioners chose to resign rather than receive this censure. The Parliament and the Council share legislative powers through a number of procedures discussed below and the power of the Parliament has grown as a result of successive treaties. Despite this it does not have the same power as national parliaments (Nugent 2006:280). It is excluded from some areas of activity such as foreign and security policy, it does not have full legislative powers, its budgetary powers are limited, and finally it does not have the power to overthrow a government.

The case for the legitimacy of the EP rests on the democratic mandate of its directly elected MEPs. The growing power of the EP both in terms of the budget and in the application of the codecision process strengthens its legitimacy. Joe Fahy (Dooge and Barrington, 1999:98) describes how Parliament has increased its powers 'bit by bit' and that this provides 'a democratic aspect to EU policy'.

6. Council of Ministers

The Council of Ministers is the main decision making body of the EU. Each council meeting is attended by the appropriate minister from each EU country (agriculture, foreign affairs, transport, and so on). The minister from the country holding the presidency of the EU chairs the meetings. Supporting the Council of Ministers is COREPER and the Council Working Groups. COREPER (or, Comité des représentants permanents), is the Committee of Permanent Representatives in the European Union. COREPER considers the draft legislation from the Commission and manages the agenda for Council meetings. This streamlines the process and allows ministers to focus on just those issues on which agreement cannot be reached (Craig 2003:67). The Heads of State of the twenty-seven members of the EU, known as the European Council, meet four times a year, chaired by the president or prime minister of the country holding the presidency of the EU.

The case for the legitimacy of the council rests on fact that each of the ministers has been democratically elected to represent the interests of his or her country. The council has allowed the power of the EP to grow at its expense and at the expense of some efficiency in the decision making

process. This transfer of power to directly elected members of the European Parliament demonstrates further commitment on the part of the Council to increasing the legitimacy of the process.

7. The changing relationship between Council and Parliament

The Council and Parliament share legislative power through a number of procedures. The consultation procedure is the weakest of these and involves the Council seeking the opinion of the Parliament; however they are not bound by the view expressed. Under the co-operation procedure, introduced by the Single European Act in 1987, the Parliament can give its opinions and seek amendments. If on a second reading the amendments are not implemented, the Council is obliged to provide the Parliament with an explanation of its position (Nugent 2006:243). Also introduced in 1987 was the assent procedure, which required the European Parliament to give its assent to any international agreements, negotiated by the Commission, to any proposed enlargement of the Union, or to rules governing the operation of structural funds, or to significant trade agreements with non EU countries. The Maastricht treaty introduced the fourth and most significant procedure in 1992. The codecision procedure puts the Parliament on an equal footing with the Council when legislating on a wide range of issues. These include free movement of workers, the internal market, education, research, environment, health, culture, consumer protection, and so on (Fontaine 2006:19). The Parliament can reject a proposal from the Council in any of these areas if a majority vote against it.

Dukes (Callanan 2007:161), argues that the codecision procedure puts an extra duty on ministers to either anticipate the mood of Parliament or to engage in negotiation and conciliation in the event of divergent views. This is quite different to the behaviour of ministers in a national parliament. The relationship between the Council and the Parliament under codecision is very different to the relationship between a national executive and a national parliament. Dukes (Callanan 2007:171), points out that as the legislative function is now shared, ministers are not in control at EU level to the same extent as they are at a national level. The Council and Parliament are now formally equal partners in the legislative process (Shackleton and Raunio 2003).

However, the Council does meet in private and is accountable at state level, where national parliament may question agreements rather than to an EU forum. The ceding of power to agencies such as the ECB which the national parliaments cannot scrutinise is also problematic. Comitology also is seen as a reason for poor accountability. Committees set up by governments to supervise the executive tasks of the commission have sometimes 'gone native' and developed a life of their own. Follesdal and Hix (2006) proposed is that the Council should be more transparent, voting records should be published to allow the media to scrutinise the process of decision making. Also, that the Commission should be separated into its regulatory function and its policy/political function; the latter subject to more scrutiny and argument.

The solution, which does seem to be evolving, lies in giving more power to the Parliament, greater transparency in the Council, wider consultation by the Commission and greater honesty from national parliaments in discussing European issues, rather than blaming Brussels bureaucrats. The direct election of the Commission President either by the citizens of Europe or by national parliaments would also be desirable.

8. EU's communication with and engagement with European citizens

In 1992 the Commission appointed an expert group to evaluate the ways in which the EU provided information to the citizens of Europe. The report, published in March 1993, advocated the use of new technologies for disseminating information. The report was controversial as it was perceived to be promoting integration and attempting to influence the media. Its recommendations were seen to be too close to the line between information and propaganda (Sheehy 1997). In 1994 the Bangemann Report called for the use of new technologies to deliver government information to the citizens of Europe and saw this as a vital component of 'cohesion' and bringing citizens closer together. To continue this work the Commission established the Information Society Forum in 1995.

The use of the Internet as a communications tool was slow to take off in Europe compared to the United States. In Europe the initial usage of ICT was on the creation of databases. CORDIS (Community Research and Development Information Service), EUREKA (A Europe-wide network for industrial research and development), EURODICAUTOM (a terminology database for the European Union), EURISTOTE (Database for research on European integration), and many more provided information on topics as diverse and research and development, European living conditions and

funded EU projects. The EU was putting its information on-line but not presenting it in an accessible or attractive way for citizens to find it or use it.

An attempt to address this was the establishment of EUROPA, the official website of the European Union, in 1995. The EU went online in a meaningful way and provided for the first time a navigable and relatively straightforward way for citizens to find information on the internet. By 2009 every institution, committee, and lobby group working in Europe had its own website. EUROPA remains a starting point for most of what a citizen might need to know. What is lacking, or perhaps the key weakness of this approach, is that it is dependent on an informed and motivated citizen going to look for information. There is no attempt at citizen engagement unless it is the citizen who goes looking to engage and even then the vast amount of information available makes the task a daunting prospect.

It is not enough for political activity, processes, or policies to be published they must be perceived and understood by European citizens. This is the difference between transparency and publicity or engagement (Huller 2007). Whilst transparency has improved along with information availability the number of people accessing information is still small (Curtin and Meijer 2006:116). The Commissions White Paper on Governance in 2001 spoke about openness and transparency as a central normative task. The Laeken declaration created a framework for a transparent constitutional process and the Constitutional Treaty (and later Lisbon) declared open and transparent policy making as an important aim (Nugent 2006:116). This is still the language of top down provision of information and does not address the need to listen to the citizen or to allow input. The Commission's White paper of 2001 suggested that the responsibility to promote public talk about EU issues lay with the member states. This is problematic as even if the member states were so inclined the difficulties of having national debates, in national media, led by national figures talk about other than national issues is unlikely and without input from outside, poorly informed (Huller 2007:573).

In the absence of an EU communications or publicity infrastructure two main intermediaries connect the public to the EU policy process; these are political parties and interest groups (Hix 2005:7). Political parties are nationally based and the websites and communications strategies focus almost exclusively on national issues with the possible exception of European elections. Political groupings in the EP are not equivalent to political parties and find it difficult to have a simple message to convey to the public. So it is that individual MEP are left to manage the promotion and information flow between the Parliament and their constituents. The results are mixed but there are some very good examples of MEPs who use the capabilities of ICT to maintain links with and keep constituents informed. It also allows for a two way communication process which is important for a consultative democracy. In the case of interest groups a similar mix of engagement with, and effectiveness of, their usage of ICT is evident.

9. New ways for the EU to connect with European citizens

Fifty years ago Lippmann (1952) stated that 'the significant revolution of modern times is not industrial or economic or political, but the revolution taking place in the art of creating consent among the governed'. Giddens (2008), who popularised the term the third way, wrote about democratizing democracy. It was not that the people had tired of the democratic state but rather that they felt it not democratic enough. Early attempts to use ICT in government focused on the citizen as consumer and various interactions between the citizen and the state were put on-line. However, ICT offers news ways of engaging the public and Morison (2001:1) puts this well when he states;

> *'It may be that any efficiency gains that are made by reinventing government and viewing it as just another provider are at the expense of an opportunity to use technology to more fundamentally reinvent democracy and re-work the relationship between citizen and state'*

Morison (2007) has also discussed the broader use of ICT in the form of blogs, wikis, web chats and other participatory fora to increase participation of the citizen. In Stanford University a considerable amount of work has been done in the Persuasive Technology Lab to determine what makes web sites credible and believable and a useful summary of the results of their annual surveys of perceptions of credibility is available in BJ Fogg's (2003:154) book on the subject. By these measures the information on many government and EU websites is far from persuasive or credible and does not fulfil the presumed intention of making a connection with the electorate. A good starting point on how blogs in particular might be better used by politicians to improve communications and increase civic engagement has been done by Wyld (2007) in his paper, 'The Blogging Revolution: Government in

the Age of Web 2.0'. Curtin and Meijer (2006) make the point that transparency and the provision of information is important but not sufficient to strengthen legitimacy.

This paper started from Beetham's (1998) standard of legitimacy based on meeting normative standards of governance and that this standard is measurable, partially, in terms of Bovens (2007) accountability framework of an actor, a forum for judgement, and an obligation to report to the forum. The relationship between technology and legitimacy is a complex one and clearly the creation of websites does not build legitimacy. What can be achieved are alternate forums for the state to interact with, and account to, the citizen. In an interview conducted by the author in March 2009, Eoin Ryan MEP was asked about his use of these alternate forms of communication:

> *"......there are literally hundreds of people who have accessed or responded to me on Twitter so that's very interesting but it's a whole new area for me. Facebook I've only just started but there is no doubt about it, you are reaching out to people who in the main do not read newspapers, and are not engaging in the normal channels for discussion on politics on what we do and what we don't do."*

In a changing and increasingly virtual world the EU needs to reconnect with the citizens where they are and move on-line in a more meaningful way. The website EuroParlTV has started to broadcast debate from the EP and to present short video programmes about topical events in the EU (www.europarltv.europa.eu). A possible further step would be to put a virtual Parliament online. In the United States a virtual House of Representatives was created in the online environment Second Life by George Miller, a California Democrat, and chairman of the House Education and Labour Committee. In 2008, Ed Markey the Democratic representative for the state of Massachusetts and chair of the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet, held a congressional hearing simultaneously in congress and online. A number of government agencies in the United States are also using Second Life; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Center for Disease Control (CDC), and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). In the French presidential election of 2007 all four major candidates opened virtual headquarters in Second Life, to engage in debates, hold political rallies and take part in protests. A number of countries including Sweden and Serbia have established embassies in Second Life and some regions such as Tuscany in Italy have tourist centres.

In his run for the White House, President Obama used Second Life and other mediated environments extensively. Is this the way European politics will go? According to Eoin Ryan MEP, who the author interviewed for this paper in March 2009:

> *".....I'd have to be honest with you and say that to actually do what Obama did I think you are going to need to be more comfortable with it and for it to become part of your everyday life. But, I suppose if you had asked me ten years ago, would I use a PC? now I just don't think about it, I just use it."*

So perhaps there are lessons for Europe. On the 29th of January 2009, Margot Wallström, the Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of Institutional Relations and Communication gave a speech entitled, *"Conversations that shape policy"* – *lessons for Europe by Obama, the first Tech President*. For Wallström (2009) the lessons from Obama's campaign were, be clear and simple, use the new media, and engage with the citizen. She concluded by saying:

> *"Whether online or face to face, whether in the old media or the new, both in the EU and the US, what democracy needs is a real conversation, in plain language, between the people and the politicians. A conversation that shapes policy. Politics from the bottom up rather than top down."*

All of these examples, and many more, point to the possibilities for consultation and engagement between state and citizen. This is one way in which the power, described by Lukes (2005), to mould perceptions and preferences, can be regained by the EU, democracy democratized, and citizenship refreshed. Of course there are limitations to the use of technology. In Europe the issue of multiple languages is one not faced by the politicians using virtual worlds in US. The issue of the digital divide is important both the economic and generational divide. However, as technology becomes more prevalent in the lives of more of the electorate, barriers to entry will fall. The children of the dot.com generation, the digital natives, are becoming the students of today. Prensky (2001) discussed the generational differences in the way we use and interact with technology and suggests that students today think differently and process information differently from previous students because of their

interaction with technology. These students he calls digital natives. These digital natives are increasingly living in a dual world of virtual reality via environments like Second Life and World of Warfare. Second Life, despite its rapid growth and its current population of 13 million users is still one of the smaller virtual worlds. It is dwarfed by the number of children using clubpenguin.com, webkinz.com, and barbiegirls.com amongst many others (Wyld 2008). These children will have none of the reluctance of their parents about online interaction.

10. Conclusion

Democracy is in the DNA of the EU, it is implicit in the consistent support for the European project amongst the nations of Europe. Questions of legitimacy which arise in relation to the EU may be linked to how the EU is communicating with the citizens of Europe. In this post modern world of on-line virtual environments the EU, in common with all organisations dependent on citizen support for legitimacy, must connect with them in ways of the citizens choosing.

The role that technology can play in addressing any perceived legitimacy deficit or lack of accountability continues to grow. As recently as 10th March 2009, Eoin Ryan MEP asked the question in the Parliament:

> *"The Commissioner has put the development of ICT and of the information society which has a huge potential benefit for European economy and for society at the heart of its programmes. However, what is the Commission doing to ensure that certain sectors of European society such as older people, and people on low income are not left behind or forgotten in this process?"*

Supplemental question:

> *"With the European elections only a few short months away what is the Commission doing to ICT to reach out to European citizens and to encourage interest and participation in EU activities specifically in the June elections?"*

Websites, blogs and even Twittering seem to be forming part of the communication toolbox of our European representatives but interestingly the notion of a virtual parliament or citizen forum has not yet appeared. In concluding Gay Mitchell summed up his perspective on the notion of legitimacy.

> *"....what's the European Union all about?....what it's about is peace and stability full stop, everything else is a bonus and what a bonus it has been....I think the European Union is a miracle happening before our eyes and we've stopped believing in miracles. We really have to step back and think about that.... these institutions that replaced panzer divisions and trenches, the Commission, Parliament and Council, all of them democratically elected or appointed. I don't see anything in business or trade unions more accountable than that. ... the question of legitimacy doesn't even occur to me."*

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