Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 800 (1983)[1]

Principles of democracy

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Recalling its continuous work to promote democracy, and notably the conferences and colloquies it organised on the development of democratic institutions (1976), on the role of political parties (1978), and on technology and democracy (1981), as well as the positions it had adopted with respect to threats to democracy such as the resurgence of fascist and racist ideology (1980) and terrorism (1982);

2. Noting that the Committee of Ministers, too, has made important contributions towards the definition of democracy, notably by adopting declarations on intolerance (1981), freedom of expression, and the development of citizen participation in the management of local affairs (1982);

3. Considering the results of the Colloquy on the concept of democracy organised by its Political and Legal Affairs Committees (Strasbourg, 23-25 March 1983);

4. Noting that the concept of democracy, which derives from a belief in the inalienable dignity and equal value of every individual human being, means that the citizen should be given every opportunity to influence, through voluntary participation, social and professional as well as political life in a spirit of solidarity, and that the democratic principle also has consequences for international relations;

5. Convinced that, important and indispensable as the criteria of the rule of law and equality before the law are, the mechanisms of democracy must be first of all a reflection of a living ethic, respectful of plurality of beliefs and the right to dissent,

6. Proclaims the following principles, which take on added importance at a time when economic recession tends to encourage egotistic reflexes by individuals and nations:

A. Social and professional life

i. Education for democracy in school and beyond is necessary to ensure awareness, especially on the part of the young, upon whom the future of democracy depends, that they are heirs to a noble ideal whose roots lie deep in the Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian culture of Europe, but contains no element of ethnic or cultural superiority or exclusiveness, being, on the contrary, essentially universal, based on human dignity.

ii. Education in human rights is equally necessary, also to ensure understanding that the enjoyment of rights is inseparable from responsibility.

iii. Free, pluralistic mass media have an important education role to play.

iv. In professional life, as elsewhere, individuals can only become fully responsible and capable of exercising democratic freedoms of choice if they are given access to the fullest information concerning their own situation and that of their firm or organisation.

v. Democratic principles require that consent should be freely given, rather than compelled, though legislation is justified to protect the weak, lacking the bargaining power to protect their interests.

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1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee,* acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 1 July 1983. See Doc. 5086, report of the Political Affairs Committee.

B. Political and institutional life

i. Free elections, with secret ballot and universal suffrage, at reasonable intervals, to parliaments, enjoying a large measure of sovereignty and composed of representatives of political parties with freedom to organise and express themselves, remain the irreplaceable core of democratic political life.

ii. Such elections, though indispensable, are not in themselves sufficient, since the citizen's political rights cannot be limited to the act of casting a vote at intervals of some years. On the contrary, democracy atrophies without frequent participation by citizens who should, wherever possible, be consulted on matters closely concerning them, through appropriate mechanisms; only full political participation enables democracy to attain that adaptability to changing circumstances which justifies our faith in its material, as well as moral superiority.

iii. Elections should not result in excessive concentration of power (doctrine of separation of powers, or even division between government and opposition power). These principles also apply to all subordinate or autonomous authorities in countries with federal or decentralised systems of government.

iv. Elected representatives lose credibility with the voters if, in today's situation (characterised by a growing workload resulting from increasing scope and complexity of government action), they seem to delegate their responsibilities to a depersonalised and computerised bureaucracy.

v. The tendency of citizens to organise, in sometimes highly militant pressure groups and "single-interest" groups, outside the political parties, is a salutary warning, fully compatible with the democratic principle of freedom, to the parties that they must not fail in their essential function of articulating the real concerns of their electors.

vi. The responsibility of elected representatives is much increased by the fact that, due to modern science and technology, their decisions may have irreversible consequences on the human and natural environment, affecting future generations and humanity itself.

C. International relations

i. The democracies will inevitably lose respect internationally and among their own young people, who despise hypocrisy, if they support oppressive dictatorial regimes, and appear complacent about the gap between North and South and hunger in the world. Politicians should not neglect their educational function, and should trust their electorate by placing them squarely before the facts and options, so that the necessary decisions (whose unpopularity is assumed rather than tested) may be taken before mankind faces further tragedy.

ii. Just as migrant workers should not be refused appropriate political rights in the host countries to whose wealth they contribute, underprivileged sectors of mankind must be helped to benefit from a more just distribution of the earth's resources and thereby to attain and pass the minimum level of material well-being compatible with human dignity, which democracy exists to express and consolidate.

D. Legal standards in democracy

i. Democracy is the government of the people by the people. Its basic principles are the rule of law and the separation of powers. Under a democratic system the rule of law governs the functioning of the government and administration, and confers on judges the power to verify whether the administration has complied with that rule.

ii. It is the responsibility of the democratic system to strike a proper balance between effective action on the part of government and administration, and the protection of citizens' rights and freedoms. In particular, the system must be capable of maintaining such a balance between the requirements of the general interest of the community and those of the protection of every individual's fundamental rights as set forth in the European Convention on Human Rights. This entails the respect of minority rights by the majority. Besides the protection of civil and political rights, care should be taken to ensure that citizens have the full benefit of their fundamental economic, social and cultural rights. An open-minded approach should also be adopted to new provisions affording fuller protection of human rights.

iii. In a crisis or state of emergency, all means available under ordinary law should be exhausted before exceptional measures are taken. Should this extreme solution prove necessary, it should be used only to the extent strictly required by the situation. On no account should the "hard core" of human rights be affected. If possible, the latter should extend beyond the sole rights specifically protected by Article 15 of the European Convention on Human Rights;

7. Resolves to formulate proposals to the Committee of Ministers concerning the Work Programme of the Council of Europe, which has a clear duty under the Statute to intensify its action to promote the above principles, in the light of its current work on European co-operation in the 1980s and of the results of the first Strasbourg Conference on Parliamentary Democracy (4-6 October 1983) with the participation of non-European democracies.