

*European Parliament, Brussels, 24 January 2023*

***Article 17 dialogue seminar on liberal democracy with churches, religious associations or communities, and philosophical and non-confessional organisations***

The promise and potential of Article 17: remarks by Philip McDonagh

First Vice-President Karas, friends –

Thank you for inviting me to speak.

In my remarks today, I will focus on the potential of Article 17 as a means of building on the recent Conference on the Future of Europe and strengthening democracy.

At the inauguration of our Centre in Dublin City University, our Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Micheál Martin, now Foreign Minister, stated the following:

The challenge is to interpret and apply our high-level values in a world that is changing rapidly and faces many “existential” questions ... There is important work to be done on the concepts and organisational principles that can encourage a mutually beneficial engagement by political leaders and other stakeholders with religious actors.

I propose to develop the Minister’s argument in two directions. First, I will argue that the political process on its own cannot generate or guarantee the cultural conditions on which democracy depends. Second, I will make some practical suggestions for strengthening our dialogue under Article 17.

Democracy depends on high-level values such as trust, loyalty, justice, and solidarity. Paradoxically, we do not legislate for friendship or virtue. There is always a distinction, or better, a dialogical relationship, between the granular provisions of the law and an underlying

ethos or sense of direction. For religious believers, this makes immediate sense. But this distinction is also essential for a coherent understanding of the nature of politics itself. It is a truth of reason that we cannot engineer friendship.

When Pope Benedict visited Auschwitz, he quoted Antigone in the Sophocles play (Sophocles, *Antigone*, 523):

I wasn't born to join with others in hating  
But to join with them in love

Antigone does not represent any of the religions or associations represented at today's seminar. But perhaps Sophocles is saying something important. The stance of this young woman on behalf of human values and human dignity represents all of us. The foundational thinkers of democracy saw clearly the difference between high-level values and changeable constitutions, laws, and regulations. When the play *Antigone* was first performed, the leading politician in Athens was Pericles. Aristotle has Pericles in mind when he pictures a political leader capable of connecting his intimation of "noble and divine things" to particular decisions (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 10.7.1.) For Aristotle, as for the post-war thinkers who first visualised our European peace project, the criterion of evaluation for any particular political choice is that it should fit within a worldview that is above day-to-day politics.

If this *décalage* between high-level values and particular choices is accepted, we come at once to my second point: how do we identify our most important cultural resources and interpret, clarify, and nurture our high-level values? One essential pathway is a sustained dialogue in well-designed frameworks of engagement. In crafting these frameworks of engagement, we should search for an overarching vision of society, a bigger language, a stronger sense of direction. At the same time, we need to test our ideas against our experience of particular situations.

Let me explain what I mean with a concrete example. In search of an overarching vision, we should seek to capture the sense of community we have often experienced during the pandemic. Our emerging vision must include an openness to more government investment

in social infrastructure. We must tackle the inequality goes against the spirit of democracy. We must recognize the local impact of global trends and the consequences of our own decisions for others. It will then be helpful to correlate these general orientations – this “bigger language” – with specific challenges across the whole range of EU policies: agriculture, trade, energy, data protection, monetary policy, and so on. We may be able to recommend new initiatives or confidence-building measures that reflect our overarching vision and anticipate the society of the future.

In this perspective, my proposal is to build on today’s important seminar by further strengthening the Article 17 framework. Here are some thoughts. First, our dialogue on democracy should continue into the future. Second, the Parliament should identify two or three other topics on which we as stakeholders can begin to reflect. Third, in advance of further meetings, the research services of the Parliament should issue the equivalent of a “call for papers” in the academic world. As a fourth step, we could place more emphasis on the “product” of our seminars. MEPs could draw on this “product” in their external engagement, for example with international partners.

Dr. Karas –

It’s time to sum up.

We should work together to frame the right high-level questions and to develop a bigger language in European politics. As an essential part of this exercise, we should give ourselves time and space for detailed discernment. The Article 17 dialogue is indispensable, holds out great promise, and deserves to be developed further.

