

Europe and UK domestic law

REPORTER:At Sunderland Stadium of Light the -

MISHAL HUSAIN:The Metric Martyrs became a cause celebre for those against the European Union. At a dinner to raise money for Steve Thoburn's legal costs, many were only too keen to voice their concerns.

REPORTER:- is perceived as the greater evil of Brussels.

DINER 1 AT FUNDRAISING EVENT:We believe it is the directives which are coming over from the European Union which are changing, or trying to change, the British way of life.

DINER 2 AT FUNDRAISING EVENT:They're building a totalitarian superstate which is run by an oligarchy. A bunch of unelected, elite officials who've got no connection with the peoples of Europe at all and no democratic accountability.

NORRIS MCWHIRTER:And we have 28,000 regulations and directives pouring forth from Brussels and including of course this whole business about the abolition of our system of weights and measures.

MISHAL HUSAIN:The main target of all this criticism, the law-making structures of the European Union. Here decisions are made to set common standards among member states. They come in two forms, directives and regulations.

Regulations are European laws and automatically override the domestic laws of a member state. Directives aren't laws in themselves; they're more like blueprints stating general goals. It's up to each member state to make an enforced legislation implementing a directive. Take metrication for instance or that infamous 'bendy cucumber'.

NICK CLEGG, MEP:Oh now this is a good one, look. It says: 'Cucumbers have to be straight and must not arch more than ten millimetres for every ten millimetres of the length'. That's what people claim comes from the EU. I actually once looked into this and discovered that there was a regulation determining the size and curve of cucumbers, but it came from the British government back in the 1960s. It had nothing to do with European Union at all.

MISHAL HUSAIN:Nick Clegg is a young Euro MP. Here the OU's cameras followed him going through the process of passing a regulation to open up telephone exchanges across Europe to all telecom suppliers. He must win the support of his fellow MEPs and negotiate on behalf of the European Parliament with the Council of Ministers. Nick's proposal, like all new laws, was originally drafted by the European Commission.

NICK CLEGG, MEP:In a way the Commission is like a sort of box of tennis balls. The tennis players, the European Parliaments and the Council of Ministers who knock legislation back and forth to each other cannot start their game until they've been provided with a tennis ball and that tennis ball is provided by the Commission.

MISHAL HUSAIN:His first task is to get his proposal through a subcommittee of the European Parliament where it'll be scrutinised and amended.

NICK CLEGG, MEP: If we've taken a step of having a regulation, we must pin these things down and the devil is unfortunately in the detail and however squeamish legislators might feel about entering into the detail, if we want to do this properly we need to.

Our second role will be to actually negotiate with the Council of Ministers, because the final text will need to represent both our views. So I only have a dual mandate if you like, to pilot the legislation through the committee stage and at the same time negotiate with the Council of Ministers on a final text.

MISHAL HUSAIN: The Council of Ministers is possibly the most powerful of the European institutions. It's made up of elected ministers of the EU's member states.

SPEAKER AT COUNCIL OF MINISTERS: If I am really waiting, [begging?] you something, -

NICK CLEGG, MEP: What you're doing in practice is not delaying, not delaying the deadline in -

SPEAKER AT COUNCIL OF MINISTERS: Several countries -

NICK CLEGG, MEP: But the basic logic is that that is where ministers and national governments thrash out deals between each other. But at the end of the day for anything to become law the Council of Ministers have to formally adopt legislation.

MISHAL HUSAIN: After some tough negotiation a deal is done. Nick must now go back to the subcommittee to secure their agreement before the regulation is put to a final vote at a full parliamentary debate in Strasbourg.

[BACKGROUND NOISE]

NICK CLEGG, MEP: Remarkable, given the amount of resistance we had even just two or three weeks ago. So I'm, no I'm absolutely delighted. It's amazing -

MISHAL HUSAIN: Whatever the regulation or directive is about, once something becomes European law, it's up to the member states to enforce it. Governments can be taken to the European Court of Justice for failing to meet their obligations.

So once Britain did make metrication a part of its own law, it did so with a vengeance and Trading Standards Departments were required to enforce it, and the rest as they say is Metric Martyrs' history.