

Hungary opens new law debate

18-10-89 P. 8

Susan Viets in Budapest

THE Hungarian Parliament yesterday opened a crucial debate on legislation which will set the ground rules for Hungary's multi-party democracy.

This week Parliament will create both the new post of President of the Republic and a constitutional court system and will discuss new electoral and party laws.

Opposition groups and the ruling party drafted this legislative package in national round table negotiations which finished last month. The laws are now before Parliament for ratification.

Now that the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party has transformed itself into the Hungarian Socialist Party it is unclear who controls the 75 per cent parliamentary majority of Communist MPs elected in 1985.

This group was headed by the former HSWP general secretary, Mr Karoly Grosz. Mr Grosz said at the weekend that he will not join the HSP and a party hardliner who claims that the HSWP still exists has asked Mr Grosz to stay on as its leader.

The HSP president, Mr Rezso Nyers, said yesterday that he will lobby to create a Socialist faction in Parliament which will be "an important group though it will be smaller than the previous party group".

Mr Nyers also said that pending minor modifications "the

round table agreement is safe."

Opposition is in fact coming mainly from opposition groups outside Parliament. The influential Alliance of Free Democrats, who participated in the national round table negotiations but refused to sign the final agreement, handed in a petition with nearly 200,000 signatures.

The alliance wants Parliament to forgo decision-making and allow a national referendum (plebiscite) on the timing of the presidential elections, the workers' militia, party property, and whether parties should be allowed to operate at the workplace.

Parliament voted to keep these issues on the agenda but said they may still be subject to a referendum later. Parliament decided yesterday to hold a referendum to choose one date for Hungary's Nation Day and a national symbol. The illuminated red star on Parliament's spire has been turned off.

In a speech yesterday the Prime Minister, Mr Miklos Nemeth, reminded MPs that they "had a responsibility to history and the nation to secure a peaceful transition". This transition may, however, come faster than anyone expected.

Earlier this week only five government ministers, including Mr Meneth, announced that they would join the HSP. The rest said they are undecided and some said they would like to join opposition groups, raising the spectre of a coalition government before the multi-party elections next year.

Reproduced with permission from
the *Guardian*

18 October 1989