

Statement by Willy Brandt to the European Parliament (19 July 1979)

Caption: On 19 July 1979, following the first elections to the European Parliament by universal suffrage, Willy Brandt, Chairman of the German Social Democratic Party, encourages Parliament to assume its new responsibilities and raises certain questions to which the European Communities will have to find answers.

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President. — I call Mr Brandt to speak on behalf of the Socialist Group.

Mr Brandt. — (D) Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, as a German Social Democrat speaking on behalf of the Socialist Group, I must admit to a mixed feeling of anger and humility at this moment. I shall try to cast aside the feeling of anger, because when I leave the artificial atmosphere of this Chamber and emerge into the fresh air of Strasbourg, I feel more strongly than ever before that this is where the heart of Europe is beating. This city is living testimony to the reconciliation and the subsequent friendship that has been forged between the German and French peoples, and which has brought progress to the whole of Europe, and not just to our two peoples. This, indeed, is the heart of our beloved, battered and resurrected Europe, whose future is now once again under threat. Europe belongs to every one of us, and we are all entrusted with its Christian, humanist and socialist heritage. There are things we must tackle together for this, our Europe, and I hope that, once we have got over these first teething troubles, we shall manage to get together to reach sensible decisions with relatively broad support in this House in more than one field.

Madam President, we have just heard from the representatives of two of the Community institutions; the representatives of a third institution now have the floor, and I realize of course that there are other institutions beside these. During the first direct elections and in the immediate post-election phase, we heard frequent complaints — and I must admit I had some sympathy with these views — to the effect that the broad masses of the peoples of Europe, and particularly the young people of Europe, felt the Community institutions to be remote from their everyday lives. Most of them knew very little about the old European Parliament, and those who did did not have a very high opinion of it. Let us not delude ourselves into thinking that most people have any real idea of the future work and the potential of the new, directly-elected Parliament. We — and I do not mean simply the few who were out to throw down a challenge to the rest of us — have proved incapable of getting this Parliament off to a good start in the eyes of the people of Europe...

(Applause)

... we shall get nowhere by relying on institutionalized impotence...

(Mixed reactions)

... and it is something we cannot expect the people of Europe to put up with. A great deal of harm has already been done, and now it is left to the Socialists' spokesman in Europe to use his speaking time of 38 minutes — after 270 minutes of what amounted to nothing more than procedural wrangling, and after listening to one and a quarter hours' worth of statements — to make a few remarks, as it were, on the side. Some of us are used to rather different procedures in our national parliaments. Let me thank you, incidentally, for the statements we have just heard. But let us not forget that the people of Europe have sent us here and have given us a great chance and, at the same time, a great deal of responsibility. I can sympathize with those who wondered whether a directly elected Parliament might not perhaps be premature. On the other hand, I think there are also grounds for wondering whether these direct elections did not in fact take place too late in the day...

(Applause)

... The answer posterity gives to these questions will depend on the quality of our work. In other words, as we heard yesterday, we must be clear in our own minds as to what role Parliament should play. We must not simply go on just as before, this House must become a forum for serious discussion. In other words, we must make this House a forum which will attract the interest of the broad masses of our peoples, particularly the younger generation. And let me say, Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, that in my opinion our committees should not make exaggerated or indiscriminate use of the instrument of public hearings ...

(Applause)

... because the judicious use of hearings could mobilize a lot of informed opinion and attract the attention of the media and public opinion on a broad front by clearly stating what problems Europe and its citizens will be confronted with in times to come.

Let me give you one example of what I mean. The next Helsinki follow-up conference on security and cooperation in Europe is due to take place in Madrid in the autumn of next year. Our countries will be taking part in this conference on an individual and an inter-governmental basis, and the European Community as such will also be involved. I think it would be worth the Political Committee's while holding a hearing this autumn to see what kind of specific cooperation is possible at present and what chances exist for such cooperation in the future, so that we at least get a bit further than we managed in Belgrade the year before last. This is not just something for diplomats — it is precisely the kind of thing that we, as elected representatives, should be doing.

(Loud applause)

If there is some substance to our work, if it serves to reinforce European consciousness and if we come up with forward-looking solutions to the problems affecting our peoples, the Council and the Commission will have no option but to take Parliament more seriously than hitherto, and to accept a sensible balance between the institutions in the coming years. And so that there is no misunderstanding on this point, let me say that this development must come about solely on the basis of the Treaties.

Let me add too that there are enough different opinions represented in this House without artificially cultivating more of them. I am very much against opinion in this House becoming unnecessarily polarized, with the result that we burn up all our energy without achieving anything other than to debase the institution as such. No Member of this House has a sole claim to the principles of liberty, and the same goes for nations. No one would wish to deprive my former and — thanks to a quirk of fate — new colleague Michel Debré of his pride in everything French. Indeed, who would dare to make the attempt? But the rest of us all have our sense of national consciousness and our personal and cultural roots, even those of us from such a difficult homeland as Germany.

(Applause)

We have the great French Socialist Jean Jaurès to thank for the fine symbol of the flowers, each standing for one of the peoples of Europe, which together could form an attractive European bouquet, or 'Strauss', as the German has it, and I hope this will not give rise to any inappropriate analogies....

(Laughter)

... not even with the other kind of 'Strauss' — the ostrich with its head in the sand.

Let us please not forget that we are becoming increasingly concerned with the Europe of the regions. The Community must, in the opinion of my Group, do more for the weak regions...

(Loud applause)

... so as to create a better regional balance. And let me add that the Community must also be alive to people's non-economic hopes and aspirations.

I should like to pick out three questions which cannot be answered today, but which should receive our attention in the future. There is the economic aspect referred to by the President of the Commission, the political — I would say security — aspect alluded to by the Council representative, and thirdly, let me put to you the following question: What — if anything — do we have to say to the young people of Europe? On the first question, dealing with the economic and social aspects, let me say that the reports on the Strasbourg and Tokyo Summits were interesting. I thought Roy Jenkins's reference to breaking the link between oil and what I would call humane growth constructive, and I was impressed by his brief reference to the chances of using the changed energy situation as a stimulus for renewed progress in Europe. This is something that is

worth thinking and talking about, so that we can make an energetic and thoughtful contribution toward formulating a European energy policy worthy of the name. What the gentlemen from the Council and the Commission have so far achieved in this field hardly merits a pass mark.

(Applause)

What we need then is an energy policy which will enable our economies to continue to grow — as they must do — and which will take account of other factors like security — the protection of the natural environment and, last but not least, job conservation. I think that after the summer break, and after thorough preparation within the various committees and political groups, we should have a full-scale debate on energy policy, rather than a discussion based on the reports from the other two institutions. It would be a good idea, though, if we could base our discussions on one of those anticipatory reports that Mr Jenkins referred to in his speech on Wednesday.

Let me say first of all that, in the opinion of the Social Democrats, of the democratic Socialists — and probably other people share this opinion — we must give serious thought to how, in this period of radical change, we can protect the existing social security systems and extend and harmonize them wherever possible. I think it is worthwhile dusting off the outlines of a social union proposed seven years ago, in October 1972, under the chairmanship of President Pompidou...

(Applause)

... Of course we cannot simply take the matter up again as if nothing had happened in the meantime. The whole thing will have to be adapted to take account of what has happened in the intervening seven years.

While I am on this point, I should like to draw your attention to the final resolution passed by the recent Third Congress of the European Confederation of Free Trade Unions in Munich, copies of which were sent to all Members of this House. A number of important proposals were put forward in this resolution, and I hope that these ideas will meet with a favourable response not only from my own Group. The same goes, ladies and gentlemen, for the absolutely essential task of introducing genuine and lasting democracy into the giant industrial companies and, particularly, the multinationals.

(Applause)

My Group feels that we have a special duty towards women, not only because they form the majority of the European electorate, but also because in their families and in their jobs — or vice versa — they are the principal victims of all these crises and upheavals which will still be with us for some time to come. Quite apart from what was said earlier today in another context, my Group is in favour of creating an ad hoc committee to produce a report on the current situation with regard to women's rights and on proposals designed to expedite the attainment of de facto — as opposed to de jure — equality...

(Applause)

... The Chairman of our Group will be putting these proposals to this House, and we hope, ladies and gentlemen, that you will give them your support on every possible occasion.

Moving on to the second major area I referred to, the question we have to ask ourselves is: What is the political status of Europe? The Council's report referred to this question — rather stiffly, I thought, but I know from my own period in government office how that kind of thing comes about. If fully sympathize with the Council, but should this prevent us from speaking our mind freely? So what is the political status of Europe and what about the security of Europe? I should just like to point out that we should not cast our gaze simply on the Community and the imminent membership of Greece, Spain and Portugal. We must also devote some of our attention to improving cooperation with the neighbouring states and — however difficult this may be — to continuing the policy of detente between East and West in this part of the world...

(Loud applause)

We can do without any new rifts in our economic relations with Northern Europe, including Finland, or with Austria or Switzerland, and we must take steps to formulate a constructive treaty with Yugoslavia. But the representatives of the Council must first of all give the Commission an improved mandate for action so that we can do everything in our power to overcome the current stagnation in the negotiations between the European Community and Comecon, although of course, many of the problems are no fault of ours.

Europe also has a vital political interest in participating in the supervision and — in a subsequent phase — in the limitation and reduction of armaments. We are all acquainted with the figures — over \$1 000 million a day, including this very 19 July 1979. I do not think I am going too far in saying that the world is quite capable of arming itself to death by the end of the century.

(Loud applause)

This can easily happen if we — together with the two super-powers — cannot reconcile our treaty obligations with our own view of ourselves as mature Europeans, and if we do not make a major effort to put an end to the senseless race to equip ourselves with the lunatic means of self-destruction. I already referred briefly to the conference that will take place in Madrid next year. While I am on this point, I should just like to point out to you that here in my Group, just a few rows away from me, I see my colleague, Jiri Pelikan from Czechoslovakia...

(Loud applause)

... who has been sent here as a Member of this House as a citizen of Italy by the Italian voters. This is another aspect of European reality, and I think I have more than a moral duty to take this opportunity on behalf of my colleagues to send our fraternal greetings to those men and women in Prague — and elsewhere — who are forced to suffer because they — like us — are concerned about such things as peace, freedom of opinion and coexistence in Europe.

(Loud applause)

My third question was: How can we fulfil the expectations held by the young people of Europe? Madam President, many sections of the younger generation are going through a shift in consciousness, characterized by a changed world around them and by widespread insecurity and dissatisfaction, and caused by what many feel to be an over-powerful governmental apparatus and a ubiquitous bureaucracy which often tends to talk down to people.

To counteract this trend, we must show our young people that there are ways and means of achieving a larger measure of responsibility and co-determination, ways which will lead us to make humane progress and which will lead us away from the false idols of uncontrolled economic or bureaucratic growth.

(Applause)

We should lend a serious ear to those who feel that our planet may not survive a continuation of the present rate of industrial development. The point at issue here is much more than environmental protection, however important this may be. It is also much more important than making prudent use of our natural resources. We shall have to rethink our attitudes to the form our industrialized societies should take. We shall have to rethink the course to be followed by the countries of the Third World, and, above all, we shall have to give much more thought than we have done so far to how we can establish genuine solidarity between the peoples of the world. And in so doing, we Socialists, we Social Democrats shall have to be just as much on our guard against nebulous idealism as against rigidly established thought patterns.

The point at issue is not so much mutual dependence as mutual interest, in both senses of the word. Our own jobs, and those of our children and our children's children, depend on the pace of developments in other parts of the world, and this is something on which peace itself also depends. I am not the only person here who, twice in his life, has experienced at first hand how war gives way to hunger. I hope we can help to

spare the younger generation the experience of how the million-fold hunger in the world can give way to war and chaos.

(Loud applause)

And finally, ladies and gentlemen I think — and I hope this will not be taken as inappropriate criticism of what has just been said — that to speak of a crisis is to play the situation down. By referring to a 'crisis', we may be deluding ourselves in to thinking that everything will soon be back on an even keel. What we are confronted with now is more like an upheaval than a crisis. This upheaval involves the collapse of outdated doctrines, economic mechanisms and the international currency system, accompanied by the struggle for a new international political order, an energy crisis — which is far more than it appears at first sight — enormous challenges to our very civilization, and still more.

There is one comforting thought in the face of all this, and one thought from which we can derive fresh courage. The people of this world are growing closer together. I think one can feel everywhere in this House how the South-East Asian refugee tragedy and the thousands of deaths in Nicaragua before a new political order emerges are really felt by the people here in Europe. I hope that this House will in future not content itself with passing lame resolutions, but will be more cautious in what it says and will then examine conscientiously how we can use our admittedly limited resources to match fine words with action.

We would draw your attention to the European Community Charter of Human Rights, which the previous European Parliament decided to formulate at the instigation of the Socialist Group. I cannot go along with everything the old Parliament did, but I certainly can in this case.

I said just now that there is one thing from which we can derive courage, and that is the younger generation's Europe, which has been growing up quietly but steadily. During the months the doctors kept me out of the political arena, I was able to witness for myself in what a gratifying way friendship has grown within Europe, particularly between Germany and France.

What my colleagues and I have to say to the younger generation is that they should continue to take their courage in their own hands, exploring new paths and not being fobbed off with backward-looking remedies. What we are out to achieve is — in the words of that resourceful, unforgettable Labour politician, Aneurin Bevan — 'a society with freedom from fear, with hope and reasonable chances for the young generation'. The young generation is looking to us for a lead.

(Loud applause)