

'The whys and wherefores of an election' from 30 jours d'Europe (March 1976)

Caption: Reflections on the advantages of electing the European Parliament by universal suffrage and on the practical aspects of such an election.

Source: 30 jours d'Europe. dir. de publ. FONTAINE, François ; Réd. Chef CHASTENET, Antoine. Mars 1976, n° 212 (numéro spécial). Paris: Bureau d'information des Communautés européennes. "Le pourquoi et le comment d'une élection", p. 36-37.

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The whys and wherefores of an election

Last December, the Rome European Council decided that, as of 1978, the European Parliament would be directly elected by universal suffrage. ‘This is the birth of a Europe of the citizens’ proclaimed the then President of the European Parliament, Mr Georges Spenale.

The time is right, however, to correct a few misconceptions in this regard. The European Parliament does not need new legitimacy: it already comprises representatives elected by the peoples of Europe, selected by the nine national parliaments from among their Members, and, therefore, it already represents the citizens of the Community and has the right to speak on their behalf. However, the citizens have very little awareness of this. They have never had to elect representatives directly to the European Parliament, they have not chosen representatives on the basis of European issues, and they have not conferred upon those representatives specific tasks relating to European integration. Direct election, therefore, will be an event which primarily concerns the peoples. In the columns of this journal, Mr Spenale emphasised, in a few particularly well-chosen and perceptive sentences, that ‘the peoples that had been isolated by the European institutions — and who, moreover, had isolated themselves — will henceforth participate in European integration, and this election will, in a way, be the birth of a European people.’

However, two objections have been levelled against these elections: firstly, that 1978 is a long way off; and, secondly, how will this election awaken genuine popular interest in European affairs? Also, sceptics remember that a French referendum on the Community had left a bitter taste ... The answer must come from the political parties and from the European movements.

Of course, it is not just on one, still unspecified, spring day in 1978 that the European peoples will burst into the Community all at once. The basics will be played out beforehand, when political parties, in order to win votes, have to fight an election campaign on European issues and to invite the electorate to declare themselves for or against a given view of the Community. Then, by casting their votes on polling day, the peoples of Europe will confer upon their elected representatives tasks which are sufficiently defined for the European Parliament to be not only the legitimate representative of the Member States of the Community (it already is), but for it to have the right and even the obligation to impose certain measures and to scrutinise their implementation by the Executive.

Indeed, the elected European Parliament will not claim to hold supreme powers. As its President stated, ‘A People’s Europe must live alongside the Europe of the States, which remain indispensable pillars of our common home; it must establish genuine and willing cooperation with the national parliaments; and it must seek a realistic balance with the other Community institutions.’ However, within the limits of the powers provided for by the European Treaties and other powers conferred upon it, Parliament will be able to ensure compliance with Community commitments and to take new initiatives.

Election procedures

For this to come to fruition, the decision of principle taken at the Rome European Council has still to be followed up with implementing provisions, and, in this regard, the relatively short timescale established must be respected. On 1 April, in Luxembourg, the Heads of Governments of the Nine must approve the Convention between the Member States of the Community, which sets out the procedures for its elections and will be subject to ratification by the national parliaments, so that the European elections will definitively and legitimately become incorporated into the law in our countries.

Which obstacles may further delay the adoption of that Convention? Essentially, the fact that the Nine have not yet reached agreement on the composition of the elected European Parliament, i.e. on the number of its Members and the allocation of seats among the various countries.

Following an in-depth study of the issue from all angles, Parliament itself had set out a formula: of the 355 Members, 71 would be from Germany, 67 from the United Kingdom, 66 from Italy, 65 from France, 27 from the Netherlands, 23 from Belgium, 17 from Denmark, 13 from Ireland and 6 from

Luxembourg [...].

This formula has met with two conflicting objections. As far as Ireland is concerned, the ‘small countries’ are not adequately represented. Conversely, France claims that the ‘proportional’ principle is not sufficiently respected and that the ‘large countries’ are at a disadvantage. Those objections were accompanied by two alternative formulae, each one quite different from the other. Suffice it to say that, according to the French proposal, Luxembourg would have 3 seats, Ireland 6 and Denmark 8, while the Irish proposal would allocate 9 seats to Luxembourg, 18 to Ireland and 20 to Denmark.

If only we could declare from the outset that one or other of the formulae is absurd! The unfortunate truth is that both theories are based on opposing, yet equally valid principles. Ireland notes that only in a fully integrated Community would the small countries accept a reduction in their share: at the current stage of European integration it could never agree to its share — as a percentage of the total number of Members of the European Parliament — being less than that laid down in the Accession Treaty. France claims, on the other hand, that we must come as close as possible to the basic notion underpinning all democracy, whereby votes must carry equal weight: why, in order to elect a Member to the European Parliament, must there be many more German, Italian, French or British citizens than citizens of Ireland, Luxembourg, Denmark or Belgium?

The compromise formula proposed by Italy has yet to reduce significantly the gap between the two positions. However, the solution must be found before the meetings of the Heads of Government in Luxembourg, where it must also be approved by them.

If election to the European Parliament means ‘the transition from a Europe of States, of cartels and of civil servants to a People’s Europe’ (once again, this phrase has been borrowed from Mr Spénale), nobody would accept that this transition be compromised or delayed by trivial differences.