

'Europeans to elect their representatives in 1978' from La Libre Belgique (13 July 1976)

Caption: On 13 July 1976, the daily newspaper La Libre Belgique comments on the agreement reached the previous day, at the Brussels European Council, on the number and the distribution of the seats in the European Parliament, due to be elected for the first time in spring 1978.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 13.07.1976, n° 195; 93e année. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "Les Européens éliront leurs députés en 1978", p. 1; 3.

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Heads of Government reach historic agreement on the allocation of seats in the European Parliament

Europeans to elect their representatives in 1978

After several months of equivocation and exorbitant expenses, the Heads of Government of the Community, meeting in Council in Brussels on Monday, have finally reached an agreement on the arrangements for the election of Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. The next European Parliament, to be elected in spring 1978, will consist of 410 Members. Each of the four biggest countries of the Community (Germany, United Kingdom, Italy and France) will elect 81 Members. The Dutch will elect 25, the Belgians 24, the Danes 16, the Irish 15 and the Luxembourgers 6.

This agreement should finally give the Europe of Nine the popular support that it has lacked to date. At all events, it removes the final obstacle to the holding of the first European elections, and so, for the first time, in May-June 1978, 150 million citizens of Europe will simultaneously go to the ballot box and vote for their 410 representatives.

It has, in fact, taken a little over a year and a half of difficult and often heated discussions to arrive at the agreement reached late on Monday afternoon by the Heads of Government at the European Council meeting in Brussels. Encouraged by the existing Members of the European Parliament, appointed by national MPs, the Paris 'summit' in December 1974 decided to put the process in motion. The task has not been easy. The interests of both 'large' and 'small' countries have had to be reconciled and, amongst the large countries, the fears of France and the United Kingdom that they would be insufficiently represented had to be allayed. In contrast, West Germany has always been amenable to any proposal.

After an agreement of principle at the European Council held in Rome in December 1975, it has taken more than six months to find a compromise acceptable to everyone.

To satisfy the French, the starting point for the latest proposals was the compromise formula unsuccessfully put forward by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing at the most recent European Council, in other words 198 Members, the same as the membership of the current Parliament. On this basis, several proposals were submitted, all of which more or less doubled the current number. None received the approval of all nine Member States. After a three-cornered debate between Bonn, London and Paris, an agreement was reached. The new proposal gave 78 seats to the four major countries (Germany, United Kingdom, Italy and France), 22 to the 'middle-sized' countries, 14 to Ireland and Denmark and six to Luxembourg.

This proposal pleased the large countries because it solved the problem of the under-representation of the small Italian parties, offered the United Kingdom a fair way of dealing with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and it gave France a number of seats exactly equivalent to the ratio of its population relative to that of the Community.

On the other hand, some of the 'small' countries (Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands) felt cheated by this solution, as they lost the advantage of the representation that they have enjoyed in the existing Parliament. However, the four 'large' countries still held only 80 % of the seats, although they account for 87.7 % of the European population.

On Monday afternoon, the Heads of Government had to get down to work again and find another 'magic' formula. Several were suggested during the course of the afternoon and, finally, the 'right' one was found. It provided for 410 Members of Parliament. The four major countries (Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and France) would have 81 Members, the Netherlands 25, Denmark 16, Ireland 15 and Luxembourg 6. Belgium would have 24 Members.

It satisfied the demands of the small countries. Together, they would have more Members than any one large country. The Netherlands, with three million more inhabitants, had one more Member than Belgium. The Danes and Irish were also pleased as they were over-represented compared to the size of their population.

On Monday evening, each Head of Government expressed his satisfaction at the Egmont Palace where Leo Tindemans was hosting a dinner. He will be the 'star' of the meeting on Tuesday, as his report on European Union will be at the heart of the discussions on this second day of the European Council meeting. The Heads of Government also agreed that they would discuss on Tuesday the financial and monetary situation and the follow-up to the Puerto Rico 'summit' on fisheries and terrorism. In the interim, on Monday evening, around the dinner table, international politics, especially Africa, was the main topic of conversation.