

Sicco Mansholt, The Crisis

Caption: In 1974, Sicco Mansholt, former Vice-President of the Commission of the European Communities and Commissioner with special responsibility for agriculture, recalls the causes and the development of the empty chair crisis.

Source: MANSHOLT, Sicco. La Crise, Conversations avec Janine Delaunay. Paris: Stock, 1974. 249 p. ISBN 2-234-00049-1. (Les Grands Leaders). p. 67-68.

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[...]

I often spoke to my mother about my concerns, and she would criticise me for not beginning with the political battle. I would reply that one cannot do everything at once. We must fight for Parliament to be elected by direct suffrage and for it to have powers, but I think that it was necessary to take account of the reality of the situation and the background picture and begin by organising the Common Market.

Wasn't that putting the cart before the horse?

I don't believe so. All the great Europeans share that view; if we had begun by seeking direct elections, we would have embarked upon never-ending discussions with no clarity to them. Europe would never have had the opportunity to develop. It was clear in Jean Monnet's mind when he established the Coal and Steel Community, and in my mind when I raised the issue of the common agricultural policy, that outlines of structures had to be the driving force which would one day see us to our destination of a political Europe.

Has the train come to a standstill?

For fifteen years, we have been in an economic prison. We have had the Hallstein Commission, the Jean Rey Commission, the Malfati Commission and the Mansholt Commission. There was absolutely no way out. De Gaulle did not want us to go beyond the Treaty of Rome.

Attempts were made on two occasions: the first was in relation to Parliament's budgetary and legislative powers. That led to the 'empty chair' crisis in 1965 when the French refused to attend meetings until talk of such powers for Parliament was abandoned.

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