

'The war over the seat' from Le Monde. Supplément aux Dossiers et Documents du Monde (May 1989)

Caption: From the beginning of the European integration process, the question of where to locate the institutional seats has been a problem. Whilst at first no one seemed to want to accommodate the European institutions, later the choice became more complex, especially for the European Parliament.

Source: Le Monde. Supplément aux Dossiers et Documents du Monde. Europe. Les promesses de l'Acte unique. dir. de publ. Lemaitre, Philippe, avec le concours de Michel Boyer et de Claire Tréan. Mai 1989. [s.l.]: Luquet, François. "La guerre du siège", auteur:Fralon, José-Alain , p. 100-101.

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The war over the seat

In the beginning — and that was not so very long ago — practically no one was interested in the European institutions, and no city wanted to take on the responsibility of providing the infrastructure for an adventure that, at the time, seemed so fraught. Jean Monnet gave ample explanation of this in his memoirs. Joseph Bech, who, until then, had seemed to be half asleep, proposed Luxembourg as the seat of the ECSC. And Luxembourg it was. That was back in 1952; since then, things have moved ahead apace.

The institutions increased in number, the Eurocrats multiplied, and Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg shared [...] in the boon of hosting those well-paid, high-class immigrants — the EU officials — not to mention the prestige of being the capital city of Europe. The seat compromise soon became firmly established, and no one dared start a quarrel. [...]

In fact, despite a few hiccups, things have gone quite smoothly for a good many years. Brussels is home to the European Commission and the EEC Council of Ministers, although, for three months every year, the Ministers and their entourages have to meet in Luxembourg. Both the Council of Europe and the European Parliament are based in Strasbourg, although Parliament's Secretariat is located in Luxembourg, which is the seat of the Court of Justice and home to some Commission departments. The end result is that a certain balance was achieved, although efficiency was sacrificed.

The election of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage in 1979 only served to confuse the issue even further. Until then, Parliament seemed to manage its peregrinations quite well and some even profited from the situation, especially in financial terms. The tin trunks filled with documents and typewriters that had to be packed up and sent off on a regular basis became part of EEC folklore. At the time, the role of the European Parliament was very low-key, and there was no reason for anyone to get upset. However, the Members of the European Parliament, now directly elected by their fellow citizens, soon began to grumble, and the British Conservative MEPs, all too happy to cause trouble, let it be known that they would not tolerate the situation forever.

However, it took nearly ten years for the crisis to boil over. In January 1989, the European Parliament approved by a comfortable majority a report which called for certain part-sessions of Parliament to be held in Brussels. The MEPs also sought to move a large proportion of Parliament's administrative services to Brussels.

It was only logical, said the MEPs, who maintained that they could not continue working under such conditions, especially now that Parliament's committees met in Brussels. In private, many French MEPs recognised that the situation was absurd, but, officially, they had little choice but to fight for their national interests. Then, on 1 January 1989, in the highly symbolic city of Strasbourg, François Mitterrand gave his New Year's address. So the French were ready to do battle, but with whom would they fight?

Since the start of the crisis, the Belgians had pretended not to take any notice. Chamber? What Chamber? Belgian officials feigned surprise when they heard of the huge civil engineering project to be carried out in the centre of Brussels for the construction of a European complex that would house an international conference centre with all the facilities required for the future seat of the European Parliament, such as a large Debating Chamber and interpreters' booths.

The wish of the elected representatives

[...] While Strasbourg has made an extraordinary effort to attract MEPs, journalists and others, MEPs would never be hindered from proximity to the Commission or the Council of Ministers, pressure groups and their own parliamentary committees, according to an eminent French MEP. But, he asked, would a Member of the French National Assembly agree to sit one day in Paris, take the train the next day to Lyons or Marseilles for committee work and then meet his staff in Toulouse or Lille?

Hence the idea was mooted, and appeared to enjoy support in Paris, to put the issue on the table and

negotiate in earnest in order to clarify the roles of the institutions. Strasbourg, the plan went, would become a sort of intellectual and legal capital of Europe. Given its symbolic importance, the city could be the venue for the extraordinary part-sessions of Parliament, visits by foreign Heads of State, etc., and would continue to be the seat of the EEC's legal bodies. And perhaps a real European university could be founded in Strasbourg. Luxembourg, continuing to do what it does best, would be the financial and banking centre of the EEC, and Brussels would be home to all the other institutions.

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