

'The new European Parliament takes its first steps' from 30 jours d'Europe (August-September 1979)

Caption: The European Parliament elected by direct suffrage in June 1979 held its first session in July 1979.

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The new European Parliament takes its first steps

The first sitting of the directly elected European Parliament augurs well for the future

The old Europe had never seen anything like it: all the main political leaders of the nine Community countries, accompanied by famous writers and other eminent persons of all kinds and backgrounds, were meeting in one Chamber, to deliberate together and to take decisions on the major and minor issues facing Europe.

At the first sitting of the directly elected European Parliament, held on 17 July, the Chamber in Strasbourg played host to not just most of the politicians who make and unmake our governments and take the decisions that determine the destiny of each one of us, it also saw the sons and nephews of the key figures of European history yesterday and even earlier: names such as Habsburg and Giolitti, Balfour and De Valera, etc.

Some said that this was nothing new in the history of Europe, the same had happened at the Congress of Vienna. In terms of a gathering of powerful men and women, this may perhaps be true, but with one difference that is so fundamental that it radically changes the significance of this event. The leaders who met in Vienna in 1815 wanted to impose their views and their law on the peoples of Europe; in Strasbourg, in 1979, the peoples' elected representatives met to speak and deliberate in the name of the people.

The larger parties and majority movements of our countries made their voices heard, but, for the first time, the enduring minorities of Europe also had a say, the minorities that give Europe its particular features which are so often valuable and enriching. There were representatives of small population groups seeking autonomy and elected representatives of protest movements, together, of course, with representatives of groups that chose to oppose their country's membership of the European Community. They were all determined to be heard and to exercise their right to speak. Even Jiri Pelikan, an exiled Czech, was there, elected by the Italian Socialist voters; his background gave him the authority to speak in the name of the silenced part of Europe.

In certain countries, the electoral laws invalidated some of the votes: about 5 % of voters could not appoint representatives because they had failed to reach the compulsory minimum threshold. Despite this shortcoming (to be remedied by a future uniform European electoral law), the new Parliament is a remarkably faithful mirror of the aspirations, hopes and wishes of the peoples of the Community.

Several observers noted another distinctive feature: the first sitting of the Europe of the peoples was chaired by two women in succession: first Mrs Louise Weiss, the oldest Member, then Mrs Simone Veil, the elected President. More than 15 % of Members were women, accounting for 62 of the 410 seats, i.e. a higher proportion than in any of the national parliaments, with the exception of Denmark.

An old dispute settled

Many had predicted that the new European Parliament would change the institutional operation of the Community but certainly not the extent to which it would do so! The notorious legal dispute about Parliament's powers seems ridiculous today. It has now become clear that what the European Parliament needs is not additional nominal powers, nor an amendment of the Treaties (unthinkable today, because it would not obtain the required unanimity on the part of the Nine), but political clout, moral authority and prestige. The first sitting of the new Parliament showed that direct elections had brought it these attributes. The other Community institutions would no longer find it easy to dismiss the positions adopted by Parliament, and Community bureaucracy would find itself facing quite new forms of control and impetus.

But if the new European Parliament had to be content with a say — albeit with greater authority — in the operation and management of the Community, it would only respond in part to the expectations of its voters. In fact, the general public, in some confusion no doubt, since nobody can ever be sure how innovations will turn out in the end, expects rather more. It expects Parliament to become a kind of 'conscience of Europe', to be able to pronounce on events that concern it and to express views that go beyond national positions,

speaking in the name of the continent as a whole.

That certainly creates a risk: namely that the European Parliament could turn into a factory churning out resolutions on anything and everything and end up as a kind of machine for signing open letters, appeals and petitions. If Parliament's opinions are to have any real meaning or appreciable scope, they will have to relate to issues on which the Community as such can indeed have a determining influence.

Realism

The first sitting showed that this was certainly the way that the directly elected Parliament saw its future role. The Members debated issues that were indeed of profound concern to the public, but always taking account of the Community's real scope for action, whether on the question of Europe's stance on the oil crisis, the measures to be taken to help the refugees of Indo-China or compliance with the 'Helsinki conclusions' in the countries of Eastern Europe.

Parliament defined the broad policy lines endorsed by the majority (avoiding unanimous decisions, which are always suspect), which it asked the other Community institutions to implement. Here, it becomes apparent that the institutional dispute about the European Parliament's powers is pointless. Does the adoption of a position on the refugees of Indo-China fall within Parliament's remit? If the question is put in these terms, it is possible that someone will reply 'no'; but the directly elected European Parliament certainly has the power to monitor decisions on the Community's food aid and its financial assistance to the countries of the Third World. In practice, there is little difference.

There are many other examples. Since it has specific responsibilities and wider powers in respect of the Community budget, Parliament has already decided not to confine itself to reviewing expenditure but also to concern itself with the revenue designed to fund the budget, i.e. in practice the proportion of the Nine's tax revenue that has to be assigned to the Community as 'own resources'. It is understood that, in this field, the decisions are not a matter for Parliament, since they fall within the remit of the governments and have to be ratified by the national parliaments. However, if the European Parliament manages to find a balanced and reasonable solution that commands the support of the main political parties, it is most unlikely that the European Commission will not endorse it or that the Council of Ministers of the Nine will reject it *a priori*.

Another example: the European Parliament has opened the debate on the partial reform of the common agricultural policy. This reform has been considered essential for some years now, but the other institutions are afraid to tackle it head-on because they fear serious clashes between some Member States. If the MEPs manage to find compromise solutions, after comparing all the different points of view and considering every legitimate interest, this could prevent agricultural policy from collapsing under the weight of certain unproductive expenditure.

A new dimension

This makes it clear that even subjects that the other institutions discuss at regular intervals in Brussels take on a new dimension when they are debated in Parliament in Strasbourg, in open session, and that means that the positions adopted by our main political leaders will be known far and wide. The general public will feel that it is taking part. It may find some key decisions that involve effort and sacrifice more acceptable if they have been discussed in open debates during which the various interests involved — whether national or professional — have had an opportunity to defend their position and argue face to face.

Like every new institution, the European Parliament came up against a few operational problems when it took its first steps. Some observers were sorry to see certain procedural disputes and manœuvres peculiar to certain parliamentary customs. The ongoing revision of the Rules of Procedure should sort that out.

Aside from a few stumbles, the overall impression gained from the new European Parliament's first steps is that Parliament will indeed be able to carry out the three fundamental tasks expected of it by those who fought for its election: to ensure democratic scrutiny of the activities of the other institutions and of

Community action and policy in general; to act as a ‘sounding box’ for the general public about activities that were far too often cloaked in secrecy or left to the discretion of the Brussels bureaucracy; to act as the ‘conscience of Europe’ by adopting a position in the name of the peoples of the Community on the major choices facing Europe, where, in the past, the people could only hear the national voices of their states.

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