

'The will of the people gives new impetus' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (14 July 1976)

Caption: On 14 July 1976, German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung considers the scope of the agreement, reached the previous day at the Brussels European Council, concerning the number and distribution of elected seats in the European Parliament.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. Eick, Jürgen; Welter, Erich; Fack, Fritz Ullrich; Deschamps, Bruno; Fest, Joachim; Reißmüller, Johann Georg. 14.07.1976, Nr. 152. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Neuer Impuls vom Völkerwillen", auteur:Kobbert, Ernst , p. 1.

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The will of the people gives new impetus

by Ernst Kobbert

On 25 March 1957 six states signed the Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Community. On 12 July 1976 the Heads of Government of the by then nine Member States agreed to direct elections for a European Parliament. In the intervening period, the Community was run, according to a criticism often levelled, by a technocracy, by which was meant both the Brussels-based Commission, which alone had power of proposal, and the Council of Ministers, which only ever dared take decisions under the watchful eye of its expert advisers. An end to the power of the technocrats is now close at hand. The Heads of Government of the nine Member States have now decided to go ahead with what was already provided for in the 1957 Treaty of Rome — that the parliamentary assembly of the Community should draw up ‘proposals for elections by direct universal suffrage in accordance with a uniform procedure in all Member States’ and that the Council ‘shall, acting unanimously, lay down the appropriate provisions, which it shall recommend to Member States for adoption in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements.’

So this article of the Treaty has taken a long time to implement, and even now it will not be applied in its totality when the first direct general elections to a European Parliament are held in 1978. This is because, for a transitional period, no account will be taken of the treaty stipulation that there should be a standard electoral procedure. Instead, Members of the European Parliament will be elected according to national custom. However, that is not generally regarded today as a crucial flaw. The main thing is that a European Parliament should be directly elected, so that it is the peoples of Europe who give its Members real legitimacy.

For years, then, the article on direct elections to the European Parliament remained on ice. Even good democrats held that the peoples of Europe could not be asked to take part in direct elections until the Parliament had acquired some real prerogatives, which, up to now, has not been the case to any great extent. However, as the lethargy into which Europe was sinking, thanks to the combined efforts of national technocrats, became increasingly patent, direct elections to a parliament came to be seen as the only opportunity to give the process of European unification fresh impetus. Speaking in Luxembourg at the foundation of the (Christian) European Peoples’ Party, Belgium’s Prime Minister, Leo Tindemans, argued that the ‘pressure of public opinion’ is needed if Europe is to move forward, and Willy Brandt has also declared himself in favour of the election of a parliament without specific prerogatives. If direct elections are to take Europe back to the fresh start it experienced after the Second World War, then the political powers in the Member States will have to get together, commit themselves to the concept of European unity and offer the electors meaningful proposals for expanding the existing structure.

So direct elections only have a point if the campaign does not turn on the question ‘what can we achieve with the present constitutional structure of Europe?’ The European Parliament as currently constituted has to its credit some good, tangible achievements. Committee rapporteurs have thoroughly investigated the issues at hand and their conclusions have been such as to attract broad public support. This Parliament has also developed its own individual style. The parliamentary groups have not been dominated by their party executives, but representatives of all nations have where possible had an opportunity to speak their mind. There were hardly any ‘backbenchers’ in this European Parliament.

Even though the European Parliament is now to be directly elected, it is not for the moment about to be given greater responsibility than hitherto. However, prominent politicians have already announced that they want to stand for seats, as they can see parallels with the early history of parliamentary democracy in Europe. Rarely have absolute monarchs voluntarily handed over powers to an elected assembly: they had to be wrested from them. That will likewise be the task of the first elected European Parliament. It has to attract leading politicians from all countries moved by the will to act as some sort of constituent assembly for Europe.

With this development, the question of the ‘double mandate’ immediately arises. If someone wishes to stand as a candidate for the European Parliament, must he or she forfeit the right to run for national parliament?

The double mandate has much to recommend itself where leading politicians are concerned, but the European Parliament also needs hard workers who will devote themselves fully to their task. Leading politicians must take European integration further. Europe needs the boost that a directly elected parliament can give, bringing to an end the domination of the technocrats. However, there is also a need for technocrats, who are able to analyse in practical terms what is in the general interest. National electoral laws must keep sight of the aim of securing influential Members for the European Parliament.