

'The Single European Act signed in Luxembourg' from the Luxemburger Wort (18 February 1986)

Caption: On 18 February 1986, the Luxembourg daily newspaper Luxemburger Wort describes the challenges faced as a result of the signing, the day before in Luxembourg, of the Single European Act by Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Source: Luxemburger Wort. Für Wahrheit und Recht. 18.02.1986, n° 40; 139e année. Luxembourg: Imprimerie Saint-Paul. "Europäische Akte in Luxemburg unterzeichnet", auteur:Gerd Werle , p. 1 et 12.

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The Single European Act signed in Luxembourg

Denmark, Greece and Italy hold back

(Gerd Werle) — Yesterday evening, in the European Centre at Kirchberg, nine of the twelve EC Member States signed the ‘Single European Act’, which was negotiated by the Heads of State or Government of the European Community countries on 2 and 3 December last in Luxembourg. Denmark, Italy and Greece did in fact attend the signing ceremony but did not sign the Act, as expected. Denmark has to wait for the result of the referendum on 27 February before it can act, and Greece and Italy will not be signing until after that date either.

The President of the Council of Ministers, Hans van den Broek of the Netherlands, delivered a short speech in the presence of the 12 Foreign Ministers of the EC Member States; the EC Commissioners, Willi de Clerq and Frans Andriessen; the Vice-President of the European Parliament, Siegbert Alber; the President of the European Court of Justice, Lord Mackenzie Stuart, and the Advocates General, Jean Mischo and G. Federico Mancini; the President of the European Auditor-General’s Office, Marcel Mart; and the President of the Economic and Social Council, Gerd Muhr. For the Community, he said, the process begun in Milan was now coming to an end. True, he had mixed feelings, but what prevailed was a sense of occasion, for this was an important moment in the history of the Community. He felt great satisfaction that a long and complex task had been brought to a successful conclusion, but the number of non-signatories caused him sadness.

Van den Broek praised Luxembourg’s chairmanship during the period of its Presidency of the EC and commended in particular the contributions made by ‘Mr Santer, Mr Poos and Mr Dondelinger’. Its great admiration for their efforts had moved the Council to sign the Single European Act here in Luxembourg. Van den Broek was convinced that the progress achieved could turn out to be even greater in practice than anyone could imagine at this juncture. The Dutch Foreign Minister saw two great merits in the reform that had been negotiated. Firstly, the Act was about rapidly establishing a genuine, completely free market, which would make Europe tangible for the ordinary citizen. The European Parliament too would be more closely involved in lawmaking and would have a further opportunity to influence the content of resolutions. The third challenge lay in the fields of science and technology that had now been provided with a legal framework. The same went for protection of the environment. The second great merit of the Single European Act, according to Van den Broek, was to have reconciled conflicting demands and endeavours.

Harsh criticism from the European Parliament

Afterwards, Siegbert Alber, Vice-President of the European Parliament, voiced criticism rather than praise. True, he described the signing as an historic event, but he claimed that the fact that not all Member States were signing simply reflected the divisions within Europe. In the end, the European Parliament had approved the Act by saying ‘Yes, but ...’, because the alternative to a little might well have been nothing at all.

Above all, Alber criticised the democratic deficit in the Community. The national executive still remained the European legislative body. In every Member State, however, such a legislative process would be unconstitutional. With bitter irony, the CDU representative remarked that the position of the European Parliament would be improved slightly, since instead of having the last word but one it would in future have the penultimate word. What disturbed him in terms of principle was the at best rudimentary and often non-existent European dimension to the national governments. Europe was a good thing only so long as there was something to be gained from it and there was no bill to pay. All things considered, what was crucial now was how life was breathed into the new treaties.

Andriessen: ‘a modest step has been taken’

The European Union might still not have been created by these treaties, observed the EC Agricultural Commissioner, Frans Andriessen, but a modest step forward had been taken. He considered the new Act to

be evidence of the viability of the Community and of its aptitude for self-renewal. Setting the year 1992 for the completion of the common internal market would allow progress to be made towards greater economic and social cohesion. The Community had also acquired a new technological dimension and, in order to put the internal market into practice, the Act provided for improved inter-institutional cooperation. Two thirds of all decisions affecting the internal market could henceforth be taken by majority vote. And while Andriessen detected a little bit of market growth for the European Parliament, he thought that the Commission would, by and large, have wanted to see more democracy in the Community's decision-making process.

Goebbels: 'ideals are better than reality'

After the three presidents, the Luxembourg State Secretary, Robert Goebbels, expressed his thanks to those present for completing the process here in Luxembourg, where it had begun at the beginning of September with the first governmental conference and where it had continued with the European Summit. As Goebbels put it, nothing in politics is more beautiful than the draft of a new treaty, though what is left in the end is generally less than ideal. However, in this instance, the long negotiations had had the merit that governments and institutions had had to deal, on the difficult road towards European Union, with precisely these ideals and the scope for realising them. Goebbels particularly emphasised the inclusion of a common foreign policy in the treaty. He concluded his remarks with the following words:

'All in all, the Community will — we hope — have some years to begin working towards the newly defined objectives and using the new methods described. What is certain is that this reform, which on a number of points represents imperfect compromises, marks the beginning of a trial period at the end of which it will be necessary to take stock of the situation and to refine or supplement what, in today's achievement, seems to those assuming the responsibilities which we currently bear to be a valuable asset which can serve as the basis for further progress towards European Union.

I should like to thank the Presidency for having given me the opportunity to add my modest contribution, although I am very sorry that my friend Jacques Poos, to whom I wish a speedy recovery, was unable to speak instead of me, as I am sure you will agree he deserved to.'