

'Nine times as dull' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (12 June 1979)

Caption: On 12 June 1979, the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung gives an initial and comparative report of the direct elections to the European Parliament (EP).

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. EICK, Jürgen; FACK, Fritz Ullrich; DESCHAMPS, Bruno; FEST, Joachim; REIßMÜLLER, Johann Georg; WELTER, Erich. 12.06.1979, n° 134. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Neunfache Nüchternheit", auteur:Stadlmann, Heinz , p. 1.

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Nine times as dull

by Heinz Stadlmann

The results of the elections to the European Parliament have produced a striking study of the condition of the Community of the Nine. Generally, voters were rather indifferent towards the polls, but there were in fact considerable differences between the Member States. Italy demonstrated with its high turnout that the European Union really means something there, but Britain showed its disdain in unmistakable fashion. The Germans and the French are no longer as enthusiastic about Europe as they once were, yet a large enough majority expressed their approval. The Netherlands, which tends to have a lot to say on European matters, did not come up to expectations. Belgium and Luxembourg are, along with Ireland, totally committed.

The complaints about the relatively low turnout are unreasonable. What could be expected of such a process which actually came 20 years too late? Hardly anyone properly understood why it was taking place at all, and it was organised in a way that completely overlooked the actual purpose. The committed European politicians had established the wrong objectives. Since, for example, it was declared that if the turnout were not at least somewhere between 60 and 70 %, that would constitute a rejection of Europe and deprive Parliament of its legitimacy. Everything was geared to national electoral models, even though everyone knew how foreign to the average citizen European matters, as they are conducted within the Community of the Nine, have remained to this day.

The worry came from the concept that the European Parliament, which is really powerless anyway, sits facing a Council of Ministers that rigorously defends its rights. A massive turnout in the elections, so the political calculation went, would make such an impression on the representatives of the national governments on the Council of Ministers, who, after all, take all the decisions, that there would be a better starting point from that fact alone. But the fact of the matter is that the Council and the Commission are influenced only by the quality of the European Parliament and its political will to express itself. Election turnouts are always of relative significance in democratic countries. In the last mid-term elections to the American Congress, participation was less than 40 %, and in Great Britain by-elections never attract the voters as a rule.

The political composition of the European Parliament is surprising. The expected Socialist domination has not materialised. Instead of that, there is a significant majority of various citizens' parties. The outcome is particularly disappointing for the German Social Democrats, who promoted a 'Workers' Europe' when their candidates were nominated and in their election campaign. The leading position that was to have been built on that was obviously miscalculated. The slogans about a Europe of the multinationals and combines have nothing to do with reality. However well or badly Europe functions, the old clichés are no longer valid. It is unfortunate that Willy Brandt now wants to defend his party's failure with what is, in retrospect, a pretty unexpected remark, that the European Parliament may not be quite so important after all and this may also have been drummed into the voters. In the past, he in particular spoke very differently on that subject.

Those who see Europe as a dull affair will also register with astonishment how the results look in countries where the Community is still hotly debated. In Great Britain, true, there was the lowest turnout, yet the Conservatives have won a landslide victory. The Tories made no secret of the fact that they take a critical view of the Community because of its internal politics, but, at the same time, they quite definitely feel part of it. The 'Yes, but' obviously had a more convincing effect than the Labour Party's constant threat of withdrawal. The Gaullists in France paid a similar price: unusually sharing common ground with the Communists, they played the anti-European card and consequently lost, of course. The coolly rational intervention of the French President in support of European cooperation was received respectfully. The exception was Denmark, where avowed anti-Europeans were strongly supported.

The need for this Parliament arises not least from the fact that financial resources of some DM 35 million are administered in the European Communities. There is also the point that even if the European Parliament has only limited powers over the budget, this expenditure and its legitimacy must be subjected to stricter parliamentary scrutiny. It is also incumbent on Parliament to express the Community's concerns. The

present structure is essentially just a balance of interests: what might serve the whole Community best is simply not defined. In the end, the debate about closer cooperation has to be revived. In the weeks before the election, many people had, for the first time, learned about everything that already existed there. Practical cooperation between European parties in a Parliament will also have a knock-on effect on national party configurations. National independent policies might get their rough edges knocked off in Europe. It is probably impossible to detect anywhere the feeling that a great historical event has taken place, but it is widely recognised that a sensible step forward has been taken.