

'Sadat must be given backing' from Europe (12 February 1981)

Caption: In his editorial of 12 February 1981, Emanuele Gazzo, Director-General of Agence Europe, comments on the speech delivered by Egyptian President, Anouar al-Sadate, to the European Parliament, and calls upon the Ten to work actively in support of the Arab-Israeli peace process.

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Sadat must be given backing

The mere fact that President Sadat should have turned to the European Parliament to express his ideas not only on the future of the Arab-Israeli conflict but also on relations between Europe and the whole of Africa and the Middle East is an exceptional event in itself. Mr Sadat came to the European Parliament because he felt it to be a suitable stage on which to address the peoples of Europe, and because, as he said, Europe is “uniquely” qualified to take a leading role in world affairs. He felt that Europe was able to assume this role because it would be revitalised by the decree of unity already achieved. These remarks should provide Europe with an incentive to ensure that it fulfils the hopes set on it.

Having said that, we might ask if President Sadat said anything new, and if so, how he said it. One thing is certain: it is above all the tone of his speech that counts. It was the tone of a statesman who is aware of his responsibilities and of the role he has to play, and who, because of this awareness, seeks discussion and peace. His remarks are a message which should be welcomed by the whole world.

President Sadat’s ideas on the development of relations between Europe and the coastal states of the southern and eastern Mediterranean, and those beyond, and the reminder of their common heritage provided a familiar backcloth for Europeans. But of particular importance was the reminder, at a time when fanaticism is provoking ideological and physical conflict, that Islam is a religion of tolerance and peace. That civilised peoples can resolve their disputes not by aggression, but by reasoning together in a spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding is, what is more, the prerequisite for solving the Palestinian issue.

President Sadat hoped that the Israelis and the Palestinians would agree to the principle of “simultaneous mutual recognition” (he consistently spoke of Palestinians without once mentioning the PLO). As we have said before, we believe the principle merit and the real goal of the Nine’s decisions in Venice, dubbed the “European initiative”, can only be to get the two major parties to the conflict to sit round the negotiating table together. Until this has been achieved, the rest will be nothing but diplomatic talks and political speculation — putting the cart before the horse.

The most important thing expected from Sadat’s speech was his judgment of the “European initiative”. What he said did not differ too much from what we already know, namely that a process has been started which must be continued. Every effort should be made to ensuring that it is successful (this is also the view expressed by a number of European statesmen). Of course, President Sadat paid tribute to the initiative itself, and particularly to what was agreed by the EEC leaders last December. But he made two demands: (1) the parties should be persuaded to meet; (2) help in providing “additional security guarantees” in the region. He asked for nothing more. This is clear, since “additional guarantees” means guarantees over and above the main guarantees already included in the terms of the initiative.

One of the most qualified observers on the issue, Ambassador Itzhak Minerbi of Israel, agrees that Europe should follow this path, ensuring at the same time that it remains completely impartial. Although he did not conceal his disagreement on specific points, Ambassador Minerbi took a generally positive view of President Sadat’s speech. In his view, those in Europe who think it possible to do anything different from Camp David are mistaken. Europe, he feels, should support the Camp David process and then launch political and economic initiatives to ensure its active presence in the whole of the Middle East region.

A PLO representative’s reaction to the speech was nevertheless negative. But we should not be discouraged. We should support Sadat in his search for peace.

Emanuele Gazzo