

'The discreet charm of being an MEP' from El País (9 June 1985)

Caption: Published in the Spanish daily newspaper El País on 9 June 1985, three days before Spain's signing of the Accession Treaty to the European Communities, this article gathers the impressions of Spanish parliamentarians on the advantages and inconveniences of becoming a Member of the European Parliament.

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The discreet charm of being an MEP

European Parliament: from Albacete to Strasbourg, with stopovers in Brussels and Luxembourg

Anabel Díez — Madrid

When Spain signs the Treaty of Accession to the European Economic Community next Wednesday, many Spanish Members of Parliament will begin to dream about their European future. Six months later, 60 of them will receive their Member of the European Parliament overnight bag, with a direct flight to Strasbourg. For three weeks out of every four, Spanish MEPs will divide their working time between Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg, striving shoulder to shoulder with their 434 new colleagues for a united Europe.

The first MEPs to be appointed, who will be welcomed to the European Parliament on 1 January next, have a good chance of having their term of office renewed. When they do, however, they will be elected not by their party leadership but by the people when the first European elections are held in Spain, probably in June 1986 at the same time as the general election. If they have not managed to learn fluent French and English, if the persistent European rain really depresses them, if their family life threatens to disintegrate and they miss their uncomfortable seat in Congress or the Senate, then those MEPs will ask their party to nominate another colleague with a greater European vocation because they wish to continue campaigning at home. Some have already said that they are unmoved by the 700 000 pesetas per month, or the duty-free Mercedes, or the secretary who will be at their disposal. Absolute silence reigns on the composition of the first list of 60 members who will go to the European Parliament in January, a situation highly reminiscent of the period prior to drawing up lists for national elections. The striking comment made by Alfonso Guerra after the PSOE had won the October elections on the difficult future facing those who had been overly enthusiastic for a post weighs indelibly on the conscience of Socialist aspirants. 'It's like a photo booth — anybody who moves a lot doesn't come out in the picture,' Guerra said, to the dismay of those who had seen their names in the media rather regularly.

Playing a valuable role

The same thing is happening now, and not just in the PSOE. 'I'd like to, but I don't know anything; whatever the party says,' Guerra invariably responds to suggestions that there is not the slightest doubt that he will go to Strasbourg. There are, in fact, many people who are prepared to speak *in the abstract*, as if it was nothing to do with them, about the incentives or drawbacks of being an MEP. 'Anyone who goes will have to be open-minded, idealistic, more concerned about the future than the present, firmly convinced that Europe has to be a united economic and political entity and that it has to overcome national self-interest', explains a Catalan MP.

'We shall try to match Members' wishes with the needs of the party and of Parliament, bearing in mind that the Spanish Parliament cannot be left vacant and that, until the next elections, the Members who do go will have to do their EP work in parallel with their domestic parliamentary duties. We shall refrain from twisting anybody's arm,' claims the Chairman of the Socialist Group, Javier Sáenz de Cosculluela. It is difficult to reconcile this combination of interests without depriving the Spanish Parliament of valuable people when representatives who are capable of playing an appropriate role are sent to Europe.

'Some people are encouraging you to go to the European Parliament, and even broadcasting it, in the hope that you will leave a seat free that will be included in the next general elections to Congress. This is my position, but don't forget, I'm not going,' commented a Castilian leader of the Grupo Popular. This Spanish Member of Parliament thinks that the idea of MEPs spending a week in Strasbourg (full-time work), the next in Brussels, sitting on one of the European Parliament's 17 committees, and the final one in Luxembourg, meeting with the ideological group to which they belong, is untenable. You would have to be a real juggler. He does not think it is enough to know beforehand that he will have one week a month free to rejoin his friends and family, get back to his hobbies and, above all, ensure that he does not disappear from the life of the electorate in his constituency or fall out of favour with them.

The number of would-be MEPs fell substantially, with a kind of natural selection, when it was announced that candidates needed fluent English or French. They are aware that, if they go to Strasbourg without knowing other languages, they will surely be doomed to isolation and that they may well make themselves look absolutely ridiculous. And the fact is that neither House of the Spanish Parliament has a great many polyglots. Despite the fact that Spanish will immediately become an official language when Spain joins the Community institutions, the system of simultaneous interpretation will be of use to MEPs for only some 10 % of their work. The rest of their business will be conducted in corridors and offices and in any European language except Spanish.

A difficult return

Yet not many people are excited by the idea of wandering for 21 days a month from hotel to hotel and from plane to plane in cities which, in the opinion of one frustrated would-be MEP, 'tend to foster reflection rather than enjoyment'. Some see the European Parliament as 'a step forward, but a difficult step back'. In other words, don't count on it for the general elections in Spain, since they may lose their connection with the province that witnessed their political birth. 'The vanity of being the first Spanish MPs who went to Europe is important for some people', claimed one of those Members of Parliament who want to go and even to repeat the experience in the future, in the hope of being able to tell their grandchildren that they helped Europe to become united and free. These convinced Europhiles embellish their account with insignificant details, such as that in the European Parliament the salary is almost 700 000 pesetas a month, MEP status makes it possible to buy a BMW for not much more than 400 000 pesetas, a certain number of free trips to all the capitals of Europe are thrown in, and working conditions are very comfortable, with secretaries and technical experts everywhere. It is an appropriate environment, they say, for working enthusiastically at achieving a true European internal market, strengthening the monetary system and seeking an external identity and security for Europe.

Even though what they call 'the idea of Europe' has not particularly caught on with many *fathers of the nation*, in the current parliamentary term contact with European Community institutions has increased considerably, so that many now know at first hand just how their colleagues in Europe work, and they talk about it in Congress just as they see it in order to nurture the European seed. The most widely *travelled* and, therefore, greatest proponents of the *idea* are, without doubt, the 19 members of the Spanish Parliament-European Joint Parliamentary Committee.

Although he might be reluctant to acknowledge it, there really is a firm candidate for the European Parliament: Luis Planas, who is currently a permanent member representing the Spanish Socialists in the European Parliament Socialist Group. Another virtual certainty is the member from Valladolid, also a Socialist, Juan Colino, because he is highly specialised in agriculture. Because of his knowledge of rural affairs, the Alliance member Antonio Navarro is another virtual certainty.

Fraga's party has put forward Carlos Robles Piquer and Luis Guillermo Perinat, members of the Senate, as MEPs. The Popular Democrats will propose the current member for the Basque Country, Julen Guimón, who is sponsored by Óscar Alzaga. By parliamentary groups, the likely division will be as follows: 36 from the PSOE, 18 from AP, a centre candidate, one for the Basque group (Jon Gangoiti), three from the Catalan Minority and another for the Mixed Group.

Apart from each Member's legitimate personal aspirations, they have almost all thought about their respective parties, and the criteria for nomination now appear to be set: *flashy* names to impress the Europeans, technocrats, and the usual padding of any electoral list, which *by decree* encompasses the awkward squad, the disobedient or the *disillusioned* who can leave a seat free.

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