

‘Parliament is underestimated’ from the Luxemburger Wort (1 June 2004)


Caption: A few days before the June 2004 European elections, the leader in the daily newspaper Luxemburger Wort reminds its readers of the not insignificant powers of the European Parliament in an attempt to encourage them to turn out and vote.

Source: Luxemburger Wort. Für Wahrheit und Recht. 01.06.2004. Luxemburg: Imprimerie Saint-Paul. "Das unterschätzte Parlament", auteur:Werle, Gerd , p. 3.

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Parliament is underestimated

‘If you’ve got a grandfather, send him to Europe.’ This disparaging maxim came into being in the days when the European Parliament was still a toothless tiger, a dumping ground for politicians past their prime. However, there has been a fundamental change in the times and, accordingly, in the balance of power, not only within the European institutions but also between individual Member States and the European Union. Europeanisation is in full swing. The EU has just admitted ten new Member States, and leading politicians are in the process of fine-tuning the European Constitution.

In fact, one might have assumed that a vital spark of enthusiasm would be left over from the accession celebrations on 1 May for the European elections on 13 June. However, this does not seem to be the case. There are no really important issues now, and the pollsters expect a relatively poor turnout for the elections. In 1999, the turnout was already as low as 45.2 %, whereas, five years earlier, 60 % of the electorate still went to the polls. As always, national parties are busy garnishing the European elections with their own respective issues. The opposition parties want to teach the parties in power in their countries a lesson and, if possible, initiate political change. Also, in many countries the Members of the European Parliament are not well known, compared with ministers and the leaders of parliamentary parties. Nor is this particularly surprising, when Strasbourg lacks the traditional configuration of Government versus Opposition. Moreover, the mass media tend to paint a negative picture of Europe instead of addressing the problems seriously.

Many citizens have probably simply failed to realise that, since the first direct elections 25 years ago, the European Parliament has developed into a power factor to be taken seriously. Thanks to the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam, it has codecision powers in some 80 % of EU legislation, having the same rights as the Council of Ministers, which represents the individual Member States. Since national parliaments have to transpose EU legislation into national law, European decisions directly affect the living conditions of citizens in the 25 Member States.

In many areas, in the 21st century, a purely national policy would simply be an absurdity. This is true of rules on environmental and consumer protection, on transport and development policy, and also on the area of domestic security, given the threats posed by international crime and by terrorism, which has long operated across borders. The European Parliament can pride itself on having substantially tightened up much legislation drawn up with insufficient rigour by the Council of Ministers, such as those on noise pollution caused by cars, aeroplanes, lawnmowers, etc., on the quality of drinking and bathing water, on additives in foodstuffs, labelling obligations for genetically modified food and many more.

The EU Constitution will give the European Parliament new rights and an even more important status. It will also acquire access to the entire agricultural policy, to immigration and asylum policy and to legislation in domestic and legal policy. At some point, the European Parliament will also be involved in deciding whether Turkey will be admitted to the EU. Moreover, the new President of the Commission, who will be appointed by the Heads of State or Government of the EU on 18 June, together with his future team, will be dependent on the approval of the Strasbourg Assembly. Previously the Heads of State or Government usually sought a candidate from their own ranks. This time, the future Commission President is to be proposed ‘in the light of the results of the European elections’. In other words, he should come from the political family that wins the elections. The most likely possibilities are the Christian Democratic EPP and the Social Democratic PES. It remains to be seen whether Pat Cox, the previous (Liberal) President of the European Parliament, still has a chance.

Apart from the countries in which voting is compulsory, such as Luxembourg and Belgium, many citizens are therefore reluctant to vote, because they have heard that Members of the European Parliament are ‘greedy rip-off merchants’. Without entering into this debate again, a negative image definitely remains as a result of the media campaigns. It is not even particularly a case of whether the expense accounts of some Members were in conformity with the rules in force or not: there are also moral obligations. Common sense simply refuses to accept that incorrect accounts are rendered or that daily subsistence allowances are not parliamentary allowances. Many Members of the European Parliament appeared to be contrite prior to the elections; whether from shame or for tactical reasons remains unclear. At all events, one of the first issues that the 732 Members

will have to address after the elections is to draw up proper rules on parliamentary allowances and expenses.

Just imagine if European election day came and nobody voted! Or in Luxembourg, for example, people went along and just handed in a blank ballot paper ... In view of the European Parliament's ever increasing influence on legislation and, hence, on the lives of 450 million citizens, would this not mean that they were disenfranchising themselves? So the rendezvous with European history in the polling station is not to be missed.

Gerd Werle