‘Strasbourg – seat of power' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (28 October 2004)

Caption: On 28 October 2004, the German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung considers the constant increase in the European Parliament’s powers since its first election by direct universal suffrage.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. 28.10.2004. Frankfurt a.M. "Machtzentrum Straßburg", auteur:Friedrich, Hajo , p. 3.

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Strasbourg — seat of power

The ‘parliamentarisation’ of the European Union / by Hajo Friedrich

BRUSSELS, 27 October. Since it was first directly elected in June 1979, the European Parliament has steadily acquired more rights with each revision of the European treaties. Not only that, but the MEPs have steadily secured greater influence. Although such a procedure is not spelled out in the EU treaties, the nominees for posts in the European Commission were recently required, for the third time (the first and second being in 1995 and 1999), to justify their appointment before Parliament’s specialist committees. Hitherto, the disparaging assumption has always been made that no candidate need seriously fear a fall at this parliamentary hurdle — but times have changed.

The advancing ‘parliamentarisation’ of European politics can be seen in the Union’s various policy-making areas and its appointments policy. Whereas Parliament previously adopted most of the Commission’s legislative proposals virtually without amendment, resistance to what can, at times, be a bureaucratic mania for regulation is increasingly common. More and more draft directives are being blocked. There has also been a tremendous increase in the MEPs’ self-confidence and in their readiness to oppose the national governments. This is evident, for example, in all-night Conciliation Committee sessions where representatives of Parliament and the Council of Ministers thrash out details of EU legislation. It is evident, too, in appointments to the Union’s top posts. Last year Hans-Gert Pöttering, Chairman of the Group of the European People’s Party and European Democrats, called for the successor to Commission President Romano Prodi to be appointed from one of the political parties represented in the biggest group in Parliament. Nor can we forget the instrumental role played by certain MEPs in bringing about the resignation of Jacques Santer’s Commission in March 1999 after a number of Commissioners had been implicated in cronyism and mismanagement. At the time, the traditional partnership between Commission and Parliament was still considered sacrosanct, and a vote of censure failed to secure a majority. The MEPs did, however, vote to appoint an independent ‘Committee of Wise Men’ to look into the allegations. To the general surprise of EU watchers, the Committee found the entire Commission guilty of irresponsibility — and the Luxembourger Jacques Santer decided that resignation was the honourable option.

Since then, however, Parliament itself has ceased to be immune from criticism over certain abuses. Numerous MEPs, including the independent Austrian Hans-Peter Martin, owe their success in the June election in no small measure to the fact that Parliament did not put its own house in order after a succession of much criticised lapses. It is likely, too, that the disputed issue of MEPs’ expenses, for example, will continue to fuel campaigning headlines in the tabloid press.

How can we measure the MEPs’ influence? The Vice-President of Parliament, Ingo Friedrich (CSU), reckons that Parliament now determines 30–40 % of European policy-making. Only the governments of the 25 Member States, represented in the Council of Ministers, enjoy more power. For its part, the European Commission, with its monopoly on proposals for legislation, retains ‘the remaining 20 % or so’, according to Friedrich. Yet the general public takes precious little notice of Parliament’s part-sessions in Strasbourg or its committee and group meetings in Brussels. This indifference was evident, too, in the turnout at the sixth European elections last June — down again in virtually every country. Average turnout across the 25 Member States was 45.7 %. Part of the reason why the people’s representatives in the EU attract so little attention is that they cannot be divided along traditional parliamentary lines into ruling party and Opposition. This means, as a rule, that the MEPs can assert their rights only on issues that command very large majorities. In practice, Parliament can defend its stance against its counter-weight, the Council of Ministers, only when there is a substantial coalition in favour of so doing. It is the legislative process that offers the main opportunity for the 732 MEPs from the 25 Member States (including 99 from Germany) to exert influence. When the planned EU Constitution comes into force, Parliament will find itself, in all areas of policy-making, on a par with the Council of Ministers, the body that represents the Member States governments.