

Statement by Willy Brandt to the European Parliament (8 July 1981)

Caption: On 8 July 1981, Willy Brandt, Leader of the German Social Democrat Party, announces his backing for a revision and reform of the structures of the European Communities with a view to improving their operation.

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President. — I call the Socialist Group.

Mr Brandt. — Mr President, may I start by expressing my appreciation of what the President of the Commission just said. I found it interesting yesterday that one of our colleagues from Luxembourg spoke English and that Mr Pasmazoglou from Greece used the French language, and I would like to ask my colleagues why do most of us carry out an act of re-nationalization as soon as we enter the plenary hall or the committee rooms? Why do those of my colleagues, to whom I usually speak in another language, expect me in any case to deliver my observations in German? Why are we insofar more backward than even the United Nations? How ponderous do we want the interpreting facilities to become for our meetings, and even more so on travels abroad? Just think of the day when we switch from seven to nine languages or even more.

Let there be no mistake. I am a passionate supporter of a Europe which does not develop into a mishmash of cultures and languages. Our Europe ought to flourish in its diversity, otherwise it would be unfaithful to itself. Of course I appreciate the need to translate all the Community documents into the languages of the Member States. What I do not accept however is that this also applies to all speeches or that we feel a sort of artificial duty to speak in our mother tongue. At any rate I reserve the right to choose the language for myself on future occasions.

I call upon as many of my colleagues as possible to communicate with each other without considerations of prestige, however much we love our own mother tongue. Anyone who normally speaks German with me should feel free to do so even if he, for example, wants to comment on what I say here this morning, and my request to the presidency is to cast a critical eye on the question of languages to which I have just made brief allusion.

Mr President, the report which our colleague Mr Hänsch explained to us deserves our full acknowledgment. The same holds true for the supplement to the report by our colleague Mr Van Miert. My group will accept those reports.

Two years ago well over 100 million men and women voted to decide the composition of this Assembly. Many people hoped that those direct elections would lead to a further democratic development of the European Community. Today we know that, despite its fresh additional legitimation, this Parliament has not greatly influenced the crisis in the Community, let alone overcome it.

The European Parliament was, and remains, too weak to achieve this. Let me repeat something which recently gave some slight offence to some of my colleagues. There was apparently no wish to entrust us with a great deal. After all, what the direct elections meant was, to begin with, the result of a compromise. Moreover, there still is a danger that the European Parliament will not attain sufficient credibility. However, the Parliament cannot simply open shop and then just close down. It is not a grocer's store or a travel agency offering package tours!

With this in mind, I have come to the following conclusion. Anyone who takes the European Community seriously must surely be keen to see its structures overhauled and reformed. He must also realize that the major task and the difficult decisions in the Community cannot be postponed any longer as is the case at present. Moreover, he must see that the European Parliament cannot yet fill the gaps which have arisen and are still arising in the parliamentary process of each or most of our countries.

It is certainly no exaggeration on my part when I state that the European Community is simply not functioning well enough.

Mr President, what we have to rethink and to reform is the functioning of the European institutions, not least including the interplay between Council, Commission and Parliament. As the Hänsch report quite rightly observes, the Council has meanwhile achieved a predominance such as was not envisaged in the Treaties.

(Applause)

Similarly — and I fully share the view expressed by the President of the Commission — the insistence on a unanimous vote as a universal rule, and thus also as a blocking mechanism, is a very bad thing. By the same token it is important to note that the European Parliament's partner is the Council. The Treaty speaks about the Council and not a number of various councils.

On the other hand, I agree there is reason to welcome the fact that the Heads of State and Government at their recent meeting in Luxembourg accepted a proposal made by the German Chancellor to the effect that the acting chairperson, if I may say so, of their Council will meet with this Assembly at the beginning — or close to the beginning — of each term.

The Treaties provide for a strong Commission — and let me also say this, Mr President, of the Commission — for something much more than simply a mixture of a top administration and a clearing house for research reports and expert reports. When Parliament was arguing over a year ago that it ought to have a say in the appointment of the Commission, it proceeded in the belief that the Commission should be a strong partner of the governments and not an authority subordinate to the governments' instructions.

(Applause)

The reports submitted to us have voiced certain modest proposals about strengthening the opportunities for Parliament to exercise its influence, and these proposals have, perhaps, the advantage that they can be realized, therefore I support them. At any rate they fall within the framework provided by the existing Treaties. What we need, apart from a streamlining of Parliament's controls, is — and I repeat within the framework of the Treaties — an extension of its competence, its rights to participate in initiating legislation and its budgetary rights. The gaining of more rights and a greater sense of priorities form the basic conditions for ensuring that the European Parliament can effectively fulfil its task, and this must always be looked upon with at least one eye on a Community which still is going to be enlarged.

Five years ago, ladies and gentlemen, when the Heads of Government had announced their acceptance of direct elections, I expressed the view that a directly elected Parliament should take care of structural future oriented tasks, but things developed differently. Against this background I appreciate that the initiative taken by Mr Spinelli and his colleagues once more gives us an opportunity to make up our minds about how to define the Community's roles and what might be the future role of its institutional instruments. The future of the Community is something this Parliament cannot leave to diplomats, nor to governments alone...

(Applause)

... with all their burdens and worries and difficulties which we know very well, most of us. Parliament has to involve itself, and it has to do it with all the relevant political forces involved, not only within this House, but together with all those within our countries who want to contribute to the growing together of the Community. What it is all about, dear colleagues, is not the future of bureaucracy, but that of the European people.

In the next elections in 1984 the European Parliament will only be able to justify the confidence placed in it and to gain further confidence if it has proved its value in the work to resolve the main issues. These are a precondition for political union. And I just mention agriculture and energy and jobs and a development towards economic, currency and social union, and I mention further harmonization of Community law and the promotion of such steps as lead to a greater sense of identification of the individual citizens with Europe. This should be done pursuant to a new principle of integration whereby centralist bureaucracy is curbed and the agreed rules are implemented as far as possible and along decentralized lines. In other words, a principle marked by participation by the citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen, only if the Community strengthens and expands the present level of unification will the Community prove able to exercise the appropriate degree of influence and in particular to counter the

dangers from the powerful arsenals of mass destruction and from the great hunger suffered in the world.

We must also continue to develop European political cooperation and this ought to be dovetailed even more than hitherto with the work of the European Parliament.

Within this context — and let me conclude by this — mention should certainly be made, as far as I can see, of the question of Europe's own responsibility in the field of security. Naturally, this is not a Community affair, as the Treaties make clear, but it is something of concern. Certainly this should not be misunderstood as being directed against the Americans, it merely reflects our growing responsibility for our own affairs. As the risks for Europe are on the increase this means that the Europeans' own responsibility is also growing. Moreover, the current world situation points to the need to define European interests as clearly as possible and to represent these interests jointly as much as possible, both within our alliance, and beyond it.

(Applause)