

'A large umbrella to cover many heads' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (21 July 1975)

Caption: On 21 July 1975, German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung covers the intention of the Liberal Parties of the Member States of the EEC to build a European Liberal Federation in order better to coordinate their policies on Community issues.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. Eick, Jürgen; Welter, Erich; Fack, Fritz Ullrich; Deschamps, Bruno; Fest, Joachim; Reißmüller, Johann Georg. 21.07.1975, Nr. 165. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Ein Hut für viele Köpfe", auteur:Meyer, Thomas , p. 8.

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A large umbrella to cover many heads

A Federation of European Liberal Parties is to be founded in Stuttgart

By Thomas Meyer

Bonn, July

When representatives of something like a dozen Liberal Parties from around Europe meet in Stuttgart in late March next year, formally to launch the 'Federation of Liberal Parties of the European Community' and thus found the first truly European party as a supranational organisation, the Community of the Nine will, superficially at least, be enhanced by an additional attraction. Whether it turns into something bigger, whether the first European party is doomed to be nothing more than a talking shop or is capable of formulating political demands and objectives — and can thus provide momentum along the road to European Union — seems uncertain. For, although the Statutes that have now been drawn up sound very good, although the Liberals, whose domestic capabilities do not normally include a talent for organisation, are now also extremely proud of the fact that they have been the first in Europe successfully to create a 'proper party' (Martin Bangemann) at international level: nevertheless, the question marks are automatically part of the package.

It is true that the form in which the Statutes are framed is quite distinct from the forms of cooperation between European brother and sister parties that had previously existed and that, from the point of view of organisation, it is more, for example, than the loose interaction in the Socialist International or between the Christian Democratic parties, or even among members of the already existing Liberal International, which holds non-binding meetings of the 'Liberal leaders' on a rotational basis. However, even a quick glance at the list of the founding members of the new Federation illustrates what a broad spectrum of opinion is to be combined here into a unified product under the European brand using the collective title of Liberal. For example, there are the 'far left' Danes (two Liberal Parties in all) plus the Liberal Party of Italy (PLI) that is regarded as being on the right. Hovering somewhere in the centre of the political spectrum there are the Free Democrats in the Federal Republic and the Liberals in the United Kingdom. In France, the independent Republicans of President Giscard d'Estaing have decided at the eleventh hour to take part in the founding Congress. The common political umbrella for this European party that is intended to be the counterpart to the Liberal Group in the European Parliament will, at all events, have to be designed in a large size to cover many heads.

During the preparatory work, what does not seem politically possible has already been filtered out. One bone of contention, above all, was whether the Federation has the power to impose binding decisions on European policies on the member parties. It was particularly the Danes who balked at this idea. This has meant that objectives and spheres of responsibility have been worded quite vaguely in the draft Statutes. The Federation will 'work towards a joint position on all the important problems affecting the Community, be active in support of direct elections to the European Parliament ... inform public opinion and take part in the development of a unified and liberal Europe.' The Federation Congress, the decision-making conference that meets once a year, may adopt resolutions on all issues involving the European Community and its further development towards political union. In addition, it may take decisions on any other subject, provided that the members unanimously decide that it falls within their remit, and, finally, it may decide to forward recommendations to the Liberal Group in the European Parliament, although no more than that. There is no provision for an 'imperative mandate'.

The key ideas for the political effectiveness of this work are of necessity vague, and this contrasts with a strictly structured form of organisation. Apart from the Congress, which is the equivalent of a national party conference, there are to be other structures: the Executive Committee, the General Secretariat and Secretary-General, all with their headquarters in Brussels. At the head of the Committee is the President of the Federation, who is elected by Congress for a two-year term.

The Federal Republic of Germany's FDP, and, above all, its then Secretary-General Flach, was involved in

the preparatory work and extremely committed to the project. Indeed, the FDP, which at the time had refused to give its agreement to the signing of the Rome Treaties, has since then pledged support for the objectives of the European Union. Europe is also to be the major topic at the next Federal Party Conference of the Free Democratic Party, which will take place in Mainz from 27 to 29 October. The paper on European policy that is to be discussed and approved in Mainz already includes updated proposals for the Constitution of the European Union. The scope of these extends into detailed provisions: general elections to the European Parliament on the basis of proportional representation (not least, in order to ensure an appropriate level of representation for the Liberals, although today there is only one Liberal Member of the European Parliament), and, in addition to the European Parliament, a 'strong' Council to ensure the representation of the national governments.

A 'European Executive' would take the place of the present Commission. During a transitional period, this would consist of a mixture of representatives of the European Parliament and of the national governments. The FDP programme for Europe also includes the demand that power over the budget be conferred on the European Parliament alone. Other items, ranging from the basic principles for the Union's foreign relations via the legal status of the European citizen to demands for a European radio and television corporation complete the Mainz manifesto.

This, then, is the detailed programme that the German Free Democrats want to incorporate in the work of the European Liberal Party. The founding Congress for this organisation in Stuttgart, a week before the regional parliamentary elections in Baden-Württemberg, promises to be a brilliant European event under the Liberal banner. It remains to be seen, after that, whether or not the unifying force of the concepts of 'Europe' and 'Liberal' is greater than national egoisms, greater also than the centrifugal force of the many directions and forces that regard themselves as Liberal. Two specific difficulties are already becoming apparent. Firstly, it has not, to date, been possible even to ensure the 'universality' of the European Liberal Party within the EC. The Republic of Ireland will not be represented for the time being, since there is no party in that country that complies with the conditions set out in the Statutes.

A second problem is revealed in one of the first amendments tabled, which are directly annexed to the draft Statutes. This relates to the position of the Secretary-General, who, it is seen as desirable, should be responsible only to the Executive Committee and not to the Congress, i.e. to the Federation's 'grass roots'. The reasons given in justification of this include statements that: 'dual responsibility could give the Secretary-General, who, according to the aim here is to be more like a business manager, an excessively powerful political position.' This could be seen as an indication of efforts to keep political powers to the lowest possible common denominator from the outset. In other words, what we have is, after all, no more than attractive packaging for just another vague collection of items on the list of European intentions.