

'Fear of a strong Parliament' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (6 March 1976)

Caption: On 6 March 1976, German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung comments on the reticence of the French Government regarding the principle of electing the European Parliament (EP) by direct universal suffrage.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. EICK, Jürgen; WELTER, Erich; FACK, Fritz Ullrich; DESCHAMPS, Bruno; FEST, Joachim; REIßMÜLLER, Johann Georg. 06.03.1976, n° 56. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Die Furcht vor einem starken Parlament", auteur:Kobbert, Ernst , p. 10.

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Fear of a strong Parliament

France causes problems for direct European elections / By Ernst Kobbert

Brussels, March

Europe may well be facing another major disappointment. No agreement on the direct elections to the European Parliament could be secured by the Foreign Ministers in two Council meetings. They have now referred the problem back to the European Council. After the decision of the Heads of State or Government, the political forces, hoping for a further development of the Community, had seriously expected the first common elections to the European Parliament to take place in spring 1978 and had made the requisite preparations.

Today, however, the question is whether this will remain yet another pipe dream. After all the obstacles that the Foreign Ministers had to confront, it is difficult to see how the European Council could adopt a resolution in early April. France, in particular, is stonewalling, although it was Valéry Giscard d'Estaing himself who had made the decision of the Heads of State or Government possible by divesting himself of the old reservations, inherited from his predecessors, about a directly elected European Parliament. This, however, has led to rifts in his own parliamentary majority. He now seems to have become more reticent again.

The French representatives in the Council of Ministers are pointing the finger at the lack of proportionality at the European Parliament. Full proportionality will never be possible, however, because of the large disparities in population figures in the individual countries. If the small Grand Duchy of Luxembourg were to be granted just one directly elected Member, the European Parliament would already have to have about a thousand Members. A solution must therefore be found that favours countries with low population figures. Parliament wants to nearly double the number of Members. Luxembourg is to have 6 MEPs, Ireland 13 (10 hitherto), Denmark 17 (currently 10), Belgium 23 (currently 14) and the Netherlands 27 (currently also 14). Ireland then submitted a counter-proposal in which the small countries were to be favoured even more: Luxembourg 9, Ireland 18, Denmark 20, Belgium 26 and the Netherlands 30. This mobilised the French, who wanted to move towards a system of proportional representation based on population figures. The French plan also provides for fewer Members, just 284, compared with the current 198, the European Parliament's proposal for 355 and the Irish proposal for 384. According to this French plan, Luxembourg would be allocated just 3 Members, Ireland 6, Denmark 8, Belgium 13 and the Netherlands 17. In every instance, the five small countries could not secure a majority in Parliament by themselves.

The problems in France probably arose because both the public debate and the report by the Belgian Prime Minister, Leo Tindemans, on direct elections also led to claims for more powers for the European Parliament. This infuriated the Gaullist opposition, who thought that a directly elected Parliament with real powers would inevitably result in 'supranationality'.

The European Community's own influence compared to that of the Member States is currently quite modest. The delegations attend Council meetings with negotiation guidelines devised by the national governments from their own political perspective but not with regard to Community interests. A Parliament with real powers might reverse this situation. That is why the French have calculated that, according to the European Parliament's proposal, the Benelux States alone would have 56 Members compared with 65 from France. The Federal Republic of Germany, on the other hand, has never complained that it was insufficiently represented with 71 representatives. According to the French proposal, the Benelux States would have 33 Members compared with 55 from France and 65 from Germany.

Although calls for more real powers for the self-elected Parliament have been made, the arrangements whereby the results of a vote could gain recognition as expressions of intent have never been discussed in detail. Given the current mood in Europe, it would still be unacceptable for simple majority decisions in the Parliament to suffice. Even the call for qualified majority voting would still not remove all the obstacles. If the European Council, meeting in Luxembourg on 1 and 2 April, wants to save at least the principle of the

1978 direct elections in order to save European citizens from a major disappointment, it may have to make the future allocation of new powers dependent on an agreement on voting arrangements. Several relevant procedures are possible. A practical hint can be taken from the new Belgian Constitution that calls, in certain cases, for a special majority in the State's semi-federalist organisation: two thirds of the votes in Parliament as a whole and a simple majority among the Members representing each of the two big ethnic groups. A given number of Members from one ethnic group can refer a bill back to the evenly balanced Government for further discussions. This would also be the direction in which to seek a reconciliation between centralist and federalist elements in Europe.