

'A breeze is blowing across Europe' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (20 February 1976)

Caption: On 20 February 1976, German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung describes the significance of the election of 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. 20.02.1976, Nr. 43. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Europäische Brise", auteur:Benckiser, Nikolas, p. 1.

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A breeze is blowing across Europe

by **Nikolas Benckiser**

To say that the announcement by the European Council — the Heads of Government of the Nine — on 2 December 1975 in Rome, supporting the direct election of Members of the European Parliament in May or June 1978, had been sensational or had been received as such might well be a gross exaggeration. This matter has a lengthy history, and the Council was merely following the instructions laid down in Article 138 of the 1957 Treaty of Rome. In fact, the Council had already set its sights on direct elections 12 months previously, in December 1974 at a Summit in Paris. As a result, the Assembly, which has called itself the 'Parliament' since 1962, has, at the invitation of the Council, established some of the details for the transition to direct elections. Accordingly, this latest resolution was no surprise, no sensation, just a cautious step forward. In addition, provision has now quite prudently been made for Members of national parliaments to be delegated to the European Parliament once again in 1978 instead of directly elected representatives (Great Britain and Denmark are planning to do just that).

Nevertheless, the prospect of such progress has brought about some movement in what one may refer to as 'Europe'. One might, at two months' remove, even go so far as to describe the response to the Rome announcement as sustained. It is, after all, remarkable that the initiative should have been taken by that very Community body in which the Member States are most heavily represented as individual countries. In France, the prospect of direct elections has triggered off particularly lively discussions in which the battle lines do not always match party boundaries. Observers are reminded of the impassioned debates that took place from 1951 to 1954 about the European Defence Community, a concept that finally collapsed because of Paris. In France and in other countries, those parties in the Christian Democrat, Social Democrat or Liberal mould have begun to consider how they will act with supranational programmes in the European Parliament and how they can persuade their electors to grant them such a new kind of mandate. They have become aware of the potential for interaction between the two domains, because the European Parliament can only be considered, as it was conceived, in terms of party rather than national groupings, just as the present Assembly already divides along party lines. However, only direct elections could give to the discussions at European level a political intensity that is typical of those at national level.

Is it any wonder that the prospect of European parliamentary elections with universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage sends out a signal? This is still the same slogan that exerted such a stirring effect in the age of the emerging national states — more so in some places than in others. The idea is growing that the hitherto frustrated hopes for European unification might be brought closer to realisation, that an awareness of European identity might develop and that public opinion might be encouraged to look more favourably on the European ideal, as opposed to the experience of the sluggish nation state and worries about sovereignty. The surprisingly positive result of public opinion polls in France in favour of direct European elections (63 % according to Sofres) is surely influenced by the (Gaullist) idea that Europe must become more independent of America. The uncertainties of American policies merely strengthen this tendency, as do the disappointments over the policy of détente with Eastern Europe. Can the European ideals of France and its partners in the Community be brought closer together under the banner of direct elections? That is certainly the hope.

We must not allow the Community's commitment to direct elections to the European Parliament to let us forget for one moment the difficulties that are still to be overcome before even the first step is taken. Not until elections are held, both on the same day and in accordance with the same law, can the election reach its full political potential. First, there is the question of a system of proportional representation that is seen to be fair and reasonable. The difficulty becomes clearer if we remember that, as a rough calculation, there will be half a million electors per representative in a Parliament of 500 Members. (Current proposals provide for a smaller number of Members, which should to some extent reduce the present over-representation of the smaller countries.) However, the discussions that have yet to take place on this and many other questions, such as the formation of parties in the European Parliament, are already part of the aura of the institution.

No one will expect miracles from direct elections to a Parliament that, for the moment, has precious little

power. However, at a time when resignation causes minds to linger on the chances for European cooperation that is bitterly accepted as inevitable, the gentle breeze of revived popular interest should not be ignored. One can certainly agree with Giscard d'Estaing when he said 'Direct consultation of the people brings Europe closer to its citizens.'