

Interview with Altiero Spinelli in Vision (November 1977)

Caption: In an interview with the economic publication Vision in November 1977, Altiero Spinelli, MEP and former Member of the European Commission, focuses on the issues involved in the first election to the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage.

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Moving towards an elected Parliament

Altiero Spinelli is a former EEC Commissioner and now an independent deputy in the Italian Parliament. He talks with VISION about possible coalitions and conflicts in a directly-elected Parliament.

Vision: There are only eight months to go before the scheduled date for election of the European Parliament, and many observers think it impossible to meet that date. Do you consider it realistic to suppose that the elections will actually take place at the beginning of the summer of 1978, or should we resign ourselves to a postponement?

Altiero Spinelli: It seems to me that there could be complications only in one case – if the British "drag their feet." There is no political problem about this in any other Common Market country, and the process of ratification will be completed with outstanding success in the second half of 1977.

France was another country with problems, but it has overcome them, and only the British problem remains. The British approved the Convention, but must still pass the election law. They have been taking their time about it. First they drew up a white paper. At one time it seemed that there might be parliamentary complications, since the Conservatives were insisting on first past the post voting – and this would have created a more complicated situation later. But Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher recently stated that the Conservatives had accepted the government's proposal.

So if the British government want it, they can obtain full ratification in two weeks or a month. I think the German government and all the others would do well to put pressure on the British – and I have the impression that the British government will understand this and will proceed rather rapidly. So I would say there is a rather good possibility of holding the elections on the scheduled date. At worst the balloting might have to be put off to autumn.

Vision: The President of the Council, Simonet, has said that if the British are not ready, the Community will hold the elections even without them. Do you consider this an acceptable hypothesis?

Spinelli: Yes, I do. In my view, Simonet did well to say that, and to say it quite vigorously. The other governments should indeed make the British understand that they are ready to do this. The British must realise that they are not going to be able to designate 81 members to serve in a European Parliament in which the others are elected. They will have 81 vacant seats in the Parliament.

Vision: Let's look at the pessimistic hypothesis for a moment and suppose there is a postponement. Would there then be important psychological and political consequences, or would there be no effect at all on European public opinion?

Spinelli: Such a move would have a negative effect on all the political figures now concerned with European affairs. We would certainly hear people say: This business of Europe is not really serious, and here we see again that the Community has made certain pledges that have not been fulfilled.

But I would not want to exaggerate the importance of public opinion. At the moment it is still standing aside but it will move when the political forces begin to move. This is illustrated by what happened in Italy at the end of the Second World War. The people had not voted for 20 years and public opinion did not attach great importance to the date of the Constituent Assembly that was being discussed by the political parties. But once the decision was made, the results of the election proved the interest of public opinion.

Vision: Have the parties already begun their election campaigns?

Spinelli: They are starting to move. The Italian Communist Party, for example, gave the "Europe problem" star billing at its festival – obviously in order to educate its campaign managers, party workers and voters. The other parties may be slower.

Vision: The European idea is mobilising certain new forces, different from the traditional parties. Among them are the ecologists, who have decided to offer a joint platform.

Spinelli: I believe they are doing the right thing. Many ecological problems are of European dimensions and should be tackled at the European level. The presence of an ecological group in the European Parliament would not displease me. The French could ally themselves with the Italian radicals.

Vision: What kind of alliances can one imagine in an elected Parliament?

Spinelli: The parliamentarians already in Strasbourg know how things are. I do not believe that there will be big divisions along the lines of great "spiritual families." The European Parliament will bear a greater resemblance to the American Congress. Let us leave out of account the parties and the ambitions of the Parliament – from the most audacious aim of becoming a real constituent assembly to the more modest one of giving an opinion on proposed regulations. Then the members of the Parliaments will be confronted with one great, basic choice: acting so as to strengthen European institutions or working to slow this strengthening.

Vision: Then the battle lines will be drawn according to the degree of adherence to European cohesion?

Spinelli: Yes, that's right. As a Gaullist put it one day, the two real parties will be the "Commission's Party" and the "Council's Party." The main distinction will be between those who defend national positions and those who favour strengthening of the Community.

If we review all the groups, we see that they are all different. The positions of the Italian Communists differ from those of the French Communists; and the Socialists range from extremely strong Pro-European stands (the Dutch, for instance) to the anti-European views of left-wing Labourites in Britain. The same is true of the Christian Democrats, who superficially seem the most united.

Things are clear for the Communists. They are not attached to the idea of forming a single large European Communist group, but they are definitely in favour of an alliance with the Socialists.

Vision: Even though election of the Parliament will not automatically increase its powers, one can expect that an elected assembly will begin to ask for something more. What will be the nature of the big conflicts with national governments?

Spinelli: The basic point is the following: the governments at least showed themselves willing to compromise in deciding on the elections. They said to themselves: "We are not going forward; we accept it is necessary to enlarge the consensus." They recalled that people have been talking for 20 years about elections for the European Parliament, and that they should respect this pledge. They decided that everything should change so that nothing changes. These elections will be of the nature desired by the Council.

Vision: So you are pessimistic about the prospect for greater powers for the Parliament?

Spinelli: No, I am not. Because if you think about the history of elected parliaments, you see that there are some parliaments that have won the battle and others that have lost it. But all have fought the battle. This parliament will fight the battle to add to its powers, which are the powers of the Community.

Vision: What should it ask for first?

Spinelli: The Community now faces three major problems. First of all is the struggle for economic policies bringing about real convergence. The Parliament has already obtained certain budgetary powers and will request stronger powers for intervening in the economic domain.

The second major question is enlargement of the Community, which presupposes adaptation so as to bring

in the new members. This adaptation should be made now. One should not say that the three new members will prevent the Community from functioning; it is already failing to function.

Vision: Do you believe in the possibility of a real European "constituent assembly"?

Spinelli: If the Parliament is not able to insist on strong constituent powers, it is worthless. But this parliament is already straining at the bit, and I do not see it failing to pursue new powers. The new parliament will be divided into a European mountain, an uncertain swampland, and a low nationalistic plain.

But I would like to add that the Europeans' participation in the election and the existence of an elected parliament do not yet represent victory. It is a battle in a new arena, with new actors joining the ranks of the old.

Interview conducted by Lidia Gazzo and Ina Selden.