

'Nine parties join the Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties in the European Community' from La Libre Belgique

Caption: On 29 March 1976, in its coverage of preparations for the first direct election to the European Parliament, the Catholic daily newspaper La Libre Belgique considers the establishment of a European Liberal Federation which would bring together the Liberal Parties of eight of the nine Member States of the European Economic Community (EEC).

Source: La Libre Belgique. 29.03.1976, n° 89; 93e année. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "Neuf partis adhèrent à la fédération libérale européenne", p. 4.

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Nine parties join the Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties in the European Community

(From our special correspondent)

Fourteen delegations from political parties which claim to be based on liberal doctrines met in Stuttgart, on Friday and Saturday, in order to establish a European federation. This move is obviously being made in preparation for the election of Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. Eight of the nine countries of the EEC were represented at the meeting — there is no Liberal Party in Ireland — under the chairmanship of Gaston Thorn, Luxembourg's Prime Minister.

The European Liberals are not yet out of the woods. The hardest is yet to come: they have to establish the existence of the federation in people's minds, even though it is only provisional, and, above all, devise an election manifesto. Judging from the discussions in Stuttgart, this will not be easy.

In spite of the meticulous preparations for the meeting, not everyone was reassured, notably Mr Thorn. All the European parties that claim to be based on liberal doctrines are far from being on the same wavelength.

Can there be an association of French Radicals of the Left, who have approved the common political programme, and Dutch Liberals, who are on the far right of the political spectrum in the Netherlands? Can parties so different from each other approve a joint declaration, however loosely worded?

This is the kind of question people were asking when they arrived in Stuttgart on Thursday evening.

A test

After the welcoming speeches on Friday morning by Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Head of the German Diplomatic Service, Jean Durieux, Chairman of the Liberal Group in the European Parliament, Manfred Rommel (son of the Field Marshal), Mayor of Stuttgart, Guido Brunner, Member of the EEC Executive Commission, and Martin Bangemann, Liberal leader of Baden-Württemberg, several of the delegations asked for the joint declaration to be discussed behind closed doors.

This had not been planned, and it certainly showed that the creation of the federation was no mere formality.

From the outset, differences arose between the two Danish Liberal parties, which are openly vying for national recognition, and between the Independent Republicans of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and the left-wing Radicals, both of them opposition parties in France together with the Socialists, Communists, etc.

It took more than three hours just to decide on a name for the federation. The joint declaration spoke of a 'federation' of liberal parties, but this was unacceptable to the French Radicals, the Italian Republicans and the French Independent Republicans. The latter managed to win support by evoking the difficulties that they would encounter at home if the very notion of the Liberal Party appeared.

Finally, by seven votes to five, with two abstentions, the following title was announced: 'Federation of Democratic Parties based on Liberal Principles'. Note that the three Belgian delegations — the Walloon Party for Freedom and Progress (PLP), the People's Party for Freedom and Progress (PVV) and the Belgian Liberal Party (PL) — voted against this title on the grounds that the term 'democratic' was implicit in the word 'liberal'. They preferred the original title 'Federation of Liberal Parties'.

The declaration

The main outlines of the declaration may be summarised as follows:

(1) The Federation welcomes the holding of the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1978.

(2) The Federation calls for the first European Parliament elected by direct universal suffrage to draw up a declaration of the human rights and fundamental freedoms directly applicable in the European Community. It wants every citizen to have the right to appeal to the European Court of Justice should his civil rights be impaired by a decision of any of the Community institutions. It also calls for the abolition of the remaining administrative restrictions within the European Community on the free movement of persons, goods, services and capital.

(3) The Federation calls for increased powers and legislative responsibilities for the European Parliament in all questions falling within the remit of the European Community, including political cooperation, and greater recourse to the Economic and Social Committee and the Standing Committee on Employment, with a particular view to securing worker participation in the management, control and profits of undertakings.

(4) The Federation calls for the promotion of free competition within a free market system and its protection from abuse by monopolies and cartels, as well as from the excessive influence of public enterprise, by allowing private firms to form themselves into genuine instruments for democracy and progress in the context of a coordinated economy, with a view to ensuring optimal economic growth and sufficient resources to provide effective help for the socially disadvantaged. It also calls for the redistribution of wealth both by use of the Social Fund to reduce inequality between individuals and the Regional Development Fund to reduce inequalities between regions.

The reference to public enterprise was added at the request of the Walloon President of the Party for Freedom and Progress (PLP), André Damseaux who, in turn, lent his support to the Italian proposals on the redistribution of wealth and agriculture policy.

On the basis of these themes, ten delegations agreed ‘unreservedly’ on Saturday morning to join the Federation: the three Belgian parties — it was Frans Grootjans, in the name of all three and in the three national languages, who was their spokesman — the Danish Liberal Party (Venstre), the German Free Democratic Party (FDP), the French Radical Republican and Radical Socialist Party, the Italian Liberal Party (PLI), the Luxembourg Democratic Party (PD) and the Dutch People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD).

The British Liberal Party, the Danish Radical Liberal Party (RV), the French Independent Republicans and Movement of the Radicals of the Left, as well as the Italian Radical Party (PRI), will sit as ‘observers’ in the Federation until the autumn Congress in The Hague.

W. V.