

'The obstacle course to Europe' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (20 September 1976)

Caption: On 20 September 1976, in its coverage of the adoption, the same day in Brussels, of the Act concerning the direct elections to the European Parliament, the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung considers the true political role of the Parliament and echoes the hopes raised in Europe by the forthcoming elections.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. EICK, Jürgen; WELTER, Erich; FACK, Fritz Ullrich; DESCHAMPS, Bruno; FEST, Joachim; REIßMÜLLER, Johann Georg. 20.09.1976, n° 210. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Hindernislauf nach Europa", auteur: Stadlmann, Heinz, p. 10.

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The obstacle course to European Union

The decision to hold common parliamentary elections is just a stage, not the goal

by Heinz Stadlmann

Brussels, 19 September

It will take place in a solemn atmosphere and people will reassure each other that the EC has taken a great step forward. However, many of the participants will actually have very mixed feelings about it if the 'Legal Act' on the introduction of direct elections to the European Parliament is signed today, Monday, in Brussels. Even at the weekend, there were some last-minute doubts about the deadline. The British, Danes and French had indeed downgraded or abandoned entirely their reservations on certain points which they had raised over the past few weeks, but you could hardly say that everything was absolutely clear. Accordingly, meetings were still being held late last week in Brussels between some national representations, and it was by no means out of the question that the Foreign Ministers would have to intervene at the last minute this very Monday.

The two documents to be signed are the Council Decision on the holding of elections in the Spring of 1978 and the Legal Act, which is the legal basis for the elections. With some Member States, the wording of the Act continually prompted new objections. The British have been fighting against too precise a wording, because they expected difficulties in the ratification process in Westminster. Time and again, the sensitivity of the British House of Commons was mentioned and how 'jealously' it was guarding its rights.

On the other hand, the French set great store by a precise wording, because they were afraid that a lack of clarity could make adoption by the National Assembly more difficult. The Italians wanted a guarantee that the European elections could continue until 2 p.m. on the Monday, as is the tradition in Italy. On the other hand, the French representatives objected that they could not guarantee keeping the results secret after the polling stations in France had closed on the Sunday evening. What is crucial for Paris, however, is that all the Member States actually hold these elections and do not try to persist just in delegating Members of Parliament, and it is not just the French who suspect that the British and the Danes may try to do this.

It is, of course, quite true to say that interest in these elections in Britain, France and Denmark is less than in other Member States. However, it would be unfair to ignore the special difficulties that arise for London. The British pro-Europeans could pursue their campaign for accession to the Economic Community only by referring to the continuing inviolable laws of the House of Commons. Elections to a European Parliament automatically raise the question of the consequent reduction in the powers of the individual state.

The next problem is the allocation of seats. The Scots and the Welsh will give every government in London a rough ride if they have the feeling that they are not going to be satisfactorily represented in a European Parliament. The Danes want the dual mandate, which is where a Member can sit in the European Parliament and in the Folketing at the same time. Coupling the European elections with the national elections is another crucial point for the Danes.

If the Convention is signed, it remains to be seen how the bills fare in the various national parliaments. The question of what happens should a country reject them has not yet been discussed in detail by the supporters of these elections. In the worst-case scenario, the existing Parliament would continue to send its appointed Members; in the best-case scenario, the other countries could still hold elections and declare themselves in agreement with the delegation of members of parliament from the states that were unable to hold elections. But no one wants to talk about that today.

To date, another concern has been mentioned only cautiously: what would it mean for the existing Community if there were a low turnout at the elections? Should that be interpreted as a vote against Europe, and would it give an impetus to the forces in various countries that do not like the whole direction in which the EC is moving? The results of opinion polls show majorities for a European Union and also for an elected

Parliament. However, under President Georges Pompidou, a referendum in France on the subject of Europe had such a low turnout that de Gaulle's successor saw no further reason to take European affairs particularly seriously.

Such fears are made all the stronger by the fact that the elected Parliament is not to be granted any extra powers. So what will be the attraction of these elections? The existing European Parliament has no right to propose legislation, so it cannot bring in any laws of its own. Control over the budget, which is after all the decisive function of any parliament, is reduced to a minimum. It is true that, in theory, the EEC Commission can be removed by a vote of no confidence, but the Council of Ministers could, totally unchallenged, reappoint the same individuals. Parliament cannot in any way exert pressure on the body that takes all the decisions, the Council of Ministers.

All hope is now concentrated on the increased political clout that a European Parliament might gain from direct elections. It should then be able to fight for an extension to its powers. Some already see the elected Parliament as the Constituent Assembly of a European Union. Probably more realistic are the assessments of those who pin their hopes on the psychological effect of an elected Parliament. In fact, it ought to be far more difficult to keep ignoring its decisions.