

Speech by Max van der Stoel (Brussels, 20 September 1976)

Caption: Speech by the President of the Council of the European Communities, Max van der Stoel, to mark the signing of the Act concerning the election of the representatives of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage (20 September 1976).

Source: European elections May-June 1978, 20 September 1976 Signature of the act. Luxembourg: Directorate-General for Information, [s.d.].

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Last updated: 14/05/2014

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“Presidents, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The act which we are about to sign today is, to me, a fundamental step on the long road which we have been following together for 24 years towards the building of a united, democratic Europe, a Europe of solidarity.

For the first time, the people of Europe will be called upon to elect their representatives, to choose between the different forms of society put before them and hence to give impetus to the development of Community action. Therein lies, in my view, the profound significance of elections by direct universal suffrage. The Communities have often been criticized for acting behind the screen of secrecy of diplomatic conferences or becoming enmeshed in bureaucracy and technicalities. We know, on the other hand, that what we are doing is directed first and foremost towards the well-being of our peoples, the raising of their standard of living and their social and economic development. Our aim is to increase the prosperity and the well-being of the people of Europe and to contribute to a stable, just world order. It is a logical extension of the democratic principles adhered to by our peoples that the citizens of Europe themselves should indicate the manner in which these objectives are to be achieved.

The idea of electing the Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage is enshrined in the Treaties and represents a bold innovation foreseen by the founders of the Communities in order to give the newborn Europe a political dimension and democratic credentials hitherto not enjoyed by any other international enterprise. However, great difficulties stood in the way of the attainment of this goal and a great deal of time, great efforts and strength of political resolve were needed to overcome them.

I would here like to pay tribute to all those whose labours have led to the decision which we are taking today. May I first mention a great European who has recently departed from us, Senator Fernand Dehousse, who was the European Parliament’s first rapporteur on direct elections and who struggled incessantly right up to the time of his death to see his dream crowned with success.

Then I would like to point to the ceaseless efforts of the whole of the European Parliament and in particular its President, Mr Spénale, and its rapporteur, Mr Patijn. The proposal which they submitted to us was balanced and realistic and greatly eased our task of finding acceptable and satisfactory solutions to the problems facing us. Finally, I would like to pay tribute to the efforts of all nine Member States’ Governments, who despite the real political difficulties facing them have given clear evidence of their courage, resolve and determination.

I am well aware that today’s act is but one step. All our national Parliaments will now have to approve it and draw up the legislation required to implement it.

I would like to make an urgent appeal to our Governments and Parliaments to continue to show the same resolve which has brought us this far, so that we may stand by the commitment which we are entering into to hold the elections throughout the Community in May or June 1978.

I am also aware that elections by universal suffrage are not in themselves an answer to all our problems. In the face of a particularly difficult economic and social situation, of a world cast into turmoil by great changes, fierce strife and dangerous tension, the Community can develop only if it retains its inner cohesion, follows a bold — and at the same time generous — external policy and strives ceaselessly to maintain stability, peace and social justice. The European Parliament to be elected by our peoples will have an essential contribution to make by playing to the full its role as provider of democratic control and political impetus.”