

'The amazing transformation of President Mitterrand' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (26 May 1984)


Caption: On 26 May 1984, the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung describes the goals of French President François Mitterrand's European policy and examines the impact of the speech he gave to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 23 May 1984.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. Deschamps, Bruno; Eick, Jürgen; Fack, Fritz Ullrich; Fest, Joachim; Reißmüller, Johann Georg. 26.05.1984, Nr. 121. Frankfurt am Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Der verblüffende Wandel Präsident Mitterrands", auteur:Stadlmann, Heinz , p. 3.

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The amazing transformation of President Mitterrand

The inventors of the veto in the Community want to abandon it

By Heinz Stadlmann

Strasbourg, 25 May. The final part-session of the European Parliament in Strasbourg before the elections in mid-June brought the kind of impetus to the proceedings that had not been seen for a long time. The normally rather moderately attended press room was overflowing, and there had surely never been that many television crews in the futuristic building before. The MEPs were determined to take on a mammoth agenda for the final round, which required sittings lasting until midnight, and despite the rather poor attendance in the Chamber, the proceedings were again, on occasions, slightly chaotic.

The unusual degree of interest was, of course, not only in the MEPs, who exploited the occasion to provide a hefty boost from Strasbourg for the lacklustre election campaign. The high spot of the week was the appearance of the French President, François Mitterrand, who, as the current President of the Council of the Community, was required by the agenda to deliver a 'declaration'. It has become the custom for the Head of State or Government of the country holding the Presidency of the European Community for a six-month period to present a report to Parliament on the achievements of the Presidency. This was difficult for Mitterrand, because the decisive summit of the Heads of State or Government does not take place until the end of June, while Parliament finishes its work this week. It was, therefore, deemed to be agreed by all that it would not be a matter of simply delivering the usual summary report. There had been weeks of discussions about the fact that Mitterrand intended to take a 'new initiative' in the policies for Europe, and it has also been known for just as long that Federal Chancellor Kohl and the French President had held several discussions on the subject during their meetings.

An aura of dignity

Whenever the President of France makes a public appearance, it is certain that the most thorough preparations will have been made, together with a large amount of effort and expense. The visit to Parliament had been arranged for eleven o'clock, but police guards in pairs had already been in position on both sides of the approach roads at eight o'clock in the morning. At the front of the building and in the entrance hall, well ahead of time, groups of visitors and Parliament officials were milling around in order to watch the arrival of the President. Mitterrand is a past master in the art of making a stunning entrance, every bit as good as his great predecessor, Charles de Gaulle. No dithering, no awkward movements, and, as he proceeds with measured stride, he exudes an aura of dignity. Mitterrand the Socialist also has a fine feel for grandeur. Upon arrival, the Head of State is greeted with applause, which can then be heard even more strongly in the entrance hall and, finally, in the Chamber.

For the MEPs this visit is an outstanding event. It has a dual function for Mitterrand. The current President of the Council of the EC is also electioneering in his own country. In most countries, the procedure that has been designated as the European elections is not being carried out primarily as a dispute about the policies which should be adopted in the Community of the Ten. Almost everywhere, it is a test of the political balance of power in the individual country concerned. In France, it seems that the domestic aspects are particularly well defined. The middle-class Opposition wants to exploit the opportunity to inflict an electoral defeat on the Socialist and Communist government coalition. A considerable reduction in votes for the Socialists as compared with the most recent national elections might be portrayed as a criticism of government policies. The appearance of Mitterrand and the statements made by him must therefore also be seen in the context of the elections.

The President begins his speech with a statement of commitment to Europe and makes it clear that he is speaking not only as the current President of the Community but also as a 'French European'. He enumerates several stages in the development process in which he was involved and to which he had, in each case, given his agreement. During the course of his statement, his belief in Europe is repeatedly emphasised. Grandiose turns of phrase are rarely absent from speeches by French politicians. Mitterrand

rapidly directs his attention to describing the European opus that is to be created. This is something that he predicts will transform international politics and, hence, the world. However, because the sublime and the mundane lie so close together in the 'existing Europe', not even the French President can manage to avoid almost immediately talking about milk surpluses, agricultural reform, exchange-rate compensation, cereals substitutes and all those other things that exist in the real Europe. He does this in connection with a brief report about the most recent summit meeting of Heads of State or Government that took place in Brussels in March.

A line that the French Government has already been following for weeks finally became clear here. In Brussels, there was certainly agreement on many issues, but the matter of the British contribution, a point of controversy for years, again remained unresolved. Since there was to be a 'solution package', the rule hitherto in force was that, in the absence of complete unity, all other possibilities were still open. Paris is now reversing this formula. It is claiming that everything else has been settled, and only the share of the British contribution is left unresolved. Mitterrand also takes this approach when speaking to the Members of the European Parliament. The Brussels Summit is already being presented as a success for the French Presidency. Britain will simply receive a warning not to breach the Rome Treaties. In the mind of Mitterrand, there is no question of the Community having run aground and being unable to move. In his words 'the EC is alive and is working'.

A force for equilibrium

Starting from this basis, the President may dedicate his efforts to the future. He sketches out a Community that is making its contribution to development in the world and that is intended to be a force for peace and for a balance between the great powers of America and the Soviet Union. It is participating in the conquest of space and is building a European space station. A European television corporation is also part of this vision, as are European universities. Europe is building up its own legal system and is active in the struggle against aggression. This Community of ten countries takes up a joint position in reacting to events around the world. Joint security is also a part of the independence of Europe, and action will now be taken to tackle this issue.

President Mitterrand's speech is a brilliant mixture. Between the grand visions and the unavoidable details of everyday routine in Europe there are, almost as if by chance, some sudden surprises. One passage about the inadequacy of the EC and the 'ridiculous quarrels' is lightened by the amazing statement that the obligation to secure unanimity in decisions in the Community is obstructing its entire development. The listeners can hardly believe their ears when Mitterrand says that unanimity has been taken much further than was envisaged by the Luxembourg Compromise. How can we govern ourselves, asks the President with a sweeping gesture, if we are using the procedural rules of the ancient parliament of Poland 'where anyone was allowed to raise objections'? It is difficult to believe this, but it does seem to be what is happening: the inventors of the veto in the EC want to abandon it. It was also not without some amazement that the MEPs must have heard that the President is declaring himself in favour of the recovery of the authority of the Brussels EC Commission. It is not all that long ago since Paris was endeavouring to keep the Brussels bureaucracy out of all negotiations about reform, and it was usually the French governments who were attempting to undermine the role of the Commission. The transformation is quite amazing.

The European Union

Mitterrand kept the greatest surprise of all up his sleeve until the end. He informed the MEPs that his Government was prepared to consider the draft of the treaty put forward by Parliament for the foundation of the European Union and recommended preparatory talks for a conference of interested nations. Although there had previously been talk of political union, the French reservations were hardly any less than those of the British or the Danes. It was only during the Genscher-Colombo proposal for a European Union, which had been reduced to a formal declaration at the Stuttgart Summit, that Paris had made numerous concessions in the negotiations. Now Mitterrand is portraying himself as leading the way in a new direction.

The audience of MEPs, who are not used to receiving words of encouragement from Heads of State,

applauded the President loud and long. Quite unexpectedly, here was a new stimulus for the election campaign. Many of the MEPs were inclined to believe in the commitment to Europe shown by the French President. There were, admittedly, also some doubters, but they remained in the minority. What else may possibly still be hidden behind this initiative is unclear. Is this supposed to be a way of forcing the British out, or is the result going to be a two-speed development within the EC? These were naturally also the questions that the MEPs asked themselves. For one Danish Member, the issue was clear: if Mitterrand gets his way with this, he said, then we are out.