

Interview with Cornelis Berkhouwer for 30 jours d'Europe (September 1974)


Caption: On his return from Athens in September 1974, Cornelis Berkhouwer, President of the European Parliament, gives his impressions of the possible accession of Greece to the European Economic Community (EEC), in the monthly publication 30 jours d'Europe.

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Greece, Portugal, democracy and Europe

An interview with C. Berkhouwer, President of the European Parliament

Cornelis Berkhouwer, a Dutch Member of Parliament of liberal leanings (VVD party) and President of the European Parliament since 1973, visited Athens from 18 to 25 August. On his return, he gave an exclusive interview to 30 jours d'Europe.

30 jours d'Europe: *What have you learnt from your trip?*

Mr Cornelis Berkhouwer: I was greatly impressed by the very deep desire of the Greek people to develop closer ties with Europe and by their appeals to us to reciprocate with an expression of solidarity. Those were the feelings expressed by the political leaders but also by the Greeks from all walks of life whom I had the chance to meet. After my appearance on Greek television, people recognised me in the street and came up to me to shake my hand, thanking me for what I had said about the recent developments in their country. Above all, they wished Europe to do all it could to encourage the consolidation of democracy in Greece.

Here then is a people that is knocking with great determination on the Community's door. As President of the European Parliament, I intend to do everything in my power to ensure that that door is opened as widely as possible.

Q.: *On what conditions?*

R.: You will remember that an Association Agreement was signed on 9 July 1961 between the European Community and Greece. Since the military coup of 21 April 1967, that agreement has been pretty well put on ice, owing largely to the influence of the European Parliament, which deemed it unacceptable to maintain close relations with a military dictatorship.

What we want to do now is not just revive this association but enhance its status and develop its content. During my stay in Athens, I met ten or so Greek delegates who had sat on the joint committee that, prior to 1967, had enabled Members of the Greek and European Parliaments to exchange views. They would like this committee to reconvene and resume work as soon as possible.

There are other reasons for the European Parliament to wish to exert special influence in this matter. Is it not the guarantor of the democratic spirit that is meant to prevail in the Community? Its duty is therefore to ensure that associations between the Community and other countries such as Greece — and later their full accession to a united Europe — take place under the sign of democracy. I made this point very clearly to the Greek authorities, and Prime Minister Karamanlis assured me that the organisation of free elections figured high on the list of his government's priorities.

Q.: *What does Greece expect from Europe?*

R.: First, that we open our markets extensively to their agricultural and manufactured products. But also that European companies invest heavily in their country and that the loans earlier envisaged by the European Investment Bank should be unblocked — and increased. 55 million dollars were 'frozen' after the colonels' coup d'état.

Q.: *Is it fair to say that Greece's interest in Europe is directly proportional to its disillusionment with the United States?*

R.: Too much importance must not be given to the wave of anti-American feeling that is currently sweeping across Greece. The Greek Government has indeed withdrawn from NATO — like France — but in the same way it continues to belong to the Atlantic Alliance. I would say that this is a tactical move, which may well be reversed one day.

On the other hand, Europe's failure to act over the Greek/Turkish clash on Cyprus is a worrying sign of the political weakness of our continent.

Q.: *But surely it is encouraging to see that when a country takes the democratic option — today Greece, yesterday Portugal — it turns to the European Community and expresses a desire to accede to it?*

R.: Tomorrow it will perhaps be the turn of Spain, although progress towards democracy there is very slow.

Some people object that Greece, which is now expressing a desire to go from associative status to full membership of the Community, as well as Portugal, are not in an economic situation that would allow them to integrate fully into Europe. The argument does not seem convincing to me. Could not much the same be said about Ireland, Italy or even the United Kingdom?

The fact is that the Greeks, the Portuguese and the Spanish realise not only how much the Community can contribute to their standard of living and well-being but also how much it can do to help them along the road to democracy. In turn, this imposes on us an obligation to constantly improve the democratic process within our Community institutions, so that these peoples' image of a united Europe corresponds ever more closely to reality. In other words, the European Parliament's role must be expanded and its powers increased.