

'The Single European Act: what an anticlimax!' from La Libre Belgique (16 February 1986)

Caption: On 16 February 1986, the eve of the signature of the Single European Act (SEA), the Belgian newspaper La Libre Belgique publishes an article criticising the measures set out under the SEA and expressing the desire that the European Community develop, first and foremost, through a union of peoples.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 17.02.1986, n° 48; 103e année. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "L'Acte unique européen: la montagne et la souris", auteur:Gazzo, Emanuele , p. 1; 6.

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The Single European Act: what an anticlimax!

By Emanuele Gazzo

It will be late today, Monday, in Luxembourg, that the ‘Single European Act’ (a pointlessly pompous title which is meaningless to the average citizen, since it gives no indication of the document’s actual content) will be declared ‘open for signature’ by the governments of the European Community’s Member States.

First of all, why was Luxembourg chosen? Because it was during the Grand-Duchy’s Presidency that, during the second half of 1985, the ‘Intergovernmental Conference’, convened as a result of the Milan European Council, took place — the conference that would lead to the adoption of this Act.

As for the Act’s actual substance (comprising, among other things, 20 declarations, collective or unilateral, expressing numerous reservations about particular clauses or about the entire text), we see no reason to alter the judgment that we gave in these pages the day after its conclusion (*La Libre Belgique* of 16 December 1985) and which may be summed up by the statement that we are totally underwhelmed. Without denying that the Act is vaguely inspired by a wish to improve the way in which the Community operates, it is indisputable that it is far from achieving the necessary ‘qualitative leap’ as promised, and that one of the minimum objectives has not been attained: to make easier the adoption of common rules aiming to establish a real ‘integrated economic area’ in Europe through the more frequent use of majority voting, subject to the goodwill of the governments who continue to use the — illegal and arbitrary — weapon of the ‘veto’, by virtue of an alleged and unverifiable ‘national interest’.

Why have we said that this Act is ‘open for signature’? Because, in actual fact, at least three Member States have decided that they are unable to join the others, at least for the time being. The first of these is Denmark, which must obviously wait for the results of the referendum that will take place on 27 February. Yet no one can share the Danish Parliament’s position that this Act undermines national sovereignty and is, therefore, unacceptable. Nonetheless, respect for democracy and for equality between the Community’s Member States means that we must wait until the Danish people have voted and until the Danish Government has drawn the appropriate conclusions. In the final analysis, it was only a matter of waiting 10 days or so: this early signature has no practical effect and may be interpreted as merely a means of putting pressure on Denmark. All of which serves to reinforce the already widespread and not totally unjustified view that, in the Community, some are more equal than others and that no one is losing any sleep over the ‘little countries’. It is surprising that, on this occasion, the Benelux Governments have not demonstrated their usual democratic sensitivity and have, instead, shown excessive and pointless zeal.

The Italian Government, respecting the (unanimous) verdict of its Parliament, while at the same time expressing its disappointment with the inadequate substance of the Act, has shown its willingness to sign, although it will do so only when all the other Member States have ‘fully thought through their decision’.

This is why this afternoon’s ‘ceremony’ in Luxembourg will be neither solemn nor inspiring: it will confirm that the Community remains divided and that the objectives of this new impetus are a long way from being attained. It is, moreover, significant that the President of the European Parliament, Pierre Pflimlin, has conveyed apologies for absence, nor will the Chairman of the Committee on Institutional Affairs that had drawn up the draft treaty on European Union: the governments have disregarded the Parliament’s minimum demand that it should have a genuine influence on Community decisions. These decisions affect the daily life of each and every European. Why, then, were citizens and voters asked to elect their representatives directly? So that they could speak without any chance of being heard?

The truth is that the major national administrations have a real fear of the development of a genuine European power in which the people would be involved, and they are succeeding in influencing the actions of the governments for whom the European perspective is often merely a figure of speech.

Those who are preparing to sign the Single Act would do well to remember the idea on which the Community was built: ‘to unite its citizens and not its States’. These words were spoken by Jean Monnet,

and they might be considered a little unfashionable these days. However, if the concept that they describe is abandoned, the idea of European unification takes on a totally different significance: it brings to mind rather the divisions and attempts at hegemony which run throughout our history.

It is necessary to react to this and allow the people to express their opinions. From now on, a strategy needs to be devised that will involve the people more closely in the process of European integration. This might be done through referendums that are national and consultative, the verdict of which may not be disregarded by the governments. The following two brief questions, identical in all countries, might be asked:

— Are you in favour of the establishment of the United States of Europe, or European Union, according to the terms of the draft treaty drawn up by the European Parliament?

— Are you in favour of conferring on the European Parliament formal constituent functions from 1989 on the occasion of the next European elections in 1989?

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