

'Ben Fayot on Luxembourg as an EU centre: No more concessions' from Revue

Caption: The Luxembourg weekly magazine Revue publishes an interview with the MP, Ben Fayot, on the important role played by Luxembourg as the seat of the institutions of the European Union alongside two other 'European capitals', Brussels and Strasbourg.

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Ben Fayot on Luxembourg as an EU centre

No more concessions

The Europe expert is afraid that Luxembourg could gradually become an EU provincial garrison

Interview: Maryse Lanners

Revue: Luxembourg as a financial centre is in difficulties. How does it stand as an EU centre?

Ben Fayot: It is under pressure in that respect, too, and has been so for a long time. Jobs are always being cut at the European Parliament: there are now fewer than 2 000 officials working there, whereas there ought to be at least 2 086, as the Minister of State, Jean-Claude Juncker, agreed two years ago with the President of the European Parliament, Nicole Fontaine. Then again, DG IV (Research and Documentation) is gradually being transferred to Brussels.

It is now mainly the technical services and translators who remain at Parliament, and at the Commission, too, some of the interesting Directorates-General are due to be transferred to Brussels. By way of compensation, Luxembourg could be given a few agencies, but that is really not comparable. As for being the judicial capital of the EU, which Luxembourg could be, given that it is the seat of the European Court of Justice, the new Eurojust Agency has just been located in The Hague!

Revue: Is the Government not making a big enough effort, or is it simply Luxembourg's fate gradually to lose influence in Europe?

BF: Both are correct, although I would emphasise that not all the blame can be placed on the present Government. The 1965 Treaty and the decisions taken at the Edinburgh Summit in 1992 contractually guaranteed Luxembourg a certain number of European institutions and services. Yet there are strong centralist movements within the Union. Parliament would really prefer to be completely in Brussels, the Commission, too. In order to avoid any unpleasantness, our successive Governments have negotiated and made concessions. Yet as soon as the institutions were given an inch, they wanted to take a yard. I believe that the Government should now insist firmly on its contractual rights and that it should not make any further concessions.

Revue: In specific terms, is Luxembourg's position as an EU capital under threat?

BF: As a result of enlargement, we shall be getting more EU officials, mainly translators and technicians. The really interesting parts, however, are the political bodies and the intellectually demanding services such as DG IV. If we do not retain those, we shall really turn into a provincial garrison of the EU, as José Maria Gil Robles, a former President of the European Parliament, once said.

Revue: What happened to the report by the Frenchman, Alain Chantraine, who carried out a study for the Commission on the subject of Luxembourg as an EU centre?

BF: On the basis of that report, the Commission wanted to persuade the Government that Directorates should be moved to Brussels. We were to receive the Food Agency as compensation. Now there is talk of other agencies, all of them semi-official services, like the Translation Centre. They have to be self-funding: there is no provision made for them in the EU budget. The people who work there are mostly on short-term employment contracts and are not EU officials.

Revue: Where is the Translation Centre located?

BF: In the basement of the New Chamber Building where there are currently 120 people working. They translate texts on behalf of other EU agencies. Of course, that is an important service, which will grow following enlargement. That, at least, is the main argument of Commissioner Viviane Reding. She sees Luxembourg as the language centre of Europe.

Revue: What do you think about that?

BF: I am against centralisation in Brussels. Europe should keep its three capitals. Luxembourg needs important institutions, too.

Revue: Do you believe that Mrs Reding's view differs from yours on that point?

BF: Mrs Reding is a Member of the Commission, and the Commission is working on a reform. Her fellow Commissioner, Neil Kinnock, is trying to make it clear to all the other Commissioners that his intentions are the right ones, and those intentions also include combining certain Directorates in Brussels. I assume that Mrs Reding, who is also, of course, a fellow Commissioner, is aware of this and also agrees with it. After all, Mr Kinnock sells his arguments as being the position of the Commission, too.

Revue: Can this travelling circus commuting between the three capitals really continue to be justified in future?

BF: That argument is used mostly by the British in connection with those part-sessions of Parliament which take place in Strasbourg. Luxembourg is less affected by it. These are entirely material issues. Europe has not even managed to connect Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg by high-speed train. The British are annoyed, because their flight connections to Strasbourg are very poor!

Revue: Will the candidate countries also make demands and ask for their share of EU departments?

BF: Obviously they will. There are already many agencies situated throughout Europe. It is not supposed to be a centralised superstate. People do not want that.

Revue: What trump cards does Luxembourg hold as an EU capital?

BF: When I talk to European officials, I find that most of them are very contented. They enjoy the quality of life here, which is much better than in Brussels. I have the impression that very few of them want to leave. However, if new jobs are constantly being advertised in Brussels, then there will be no new people coming to Luxembourg.

Revue: Yet there are a lot of complaints about the infrastructures on Kirchberg!

BF: You have to put that in its historical context. The EU site has developed gradually. That produces the most successful arrangements, including financial arrangements. In the long term, the institutions want to own their own buildings. That is a positive development, because it binds them more closely to Luxembourg. If we create attractive conditions for Parliament, then we shall hold a strong trump card in our hand.

Revue: You are a member of the Convention which is to consider the future power mechanisms in the EU. To what extent are historical agreements from the EU's earliest years important from this point of view?

BF: There is a working party which is looking at ways of simplifying procedures. One of the subjects that they are considering is location, the question of what should be located where. This working party, of which our Permanent Representative in Brussels, Nicolas Schmit, is a member, has, to date, held only one meeting. It is expected that there will be a disagreement within the Convention over the issue of location of the various seats.

Revue: Luxembourg is the biggest net contributor to the EU, but no murmurs of complaint are heard. That's surprising, isn't it?

BF: It does not surprise me, because there is not so much money at stake. What I do find more surprising is the

fact that we did not have any discussion about the enlargement of the EU. The Commission wants to take in ten countries, and nobody, neither the politicians nor the public, is saying anything about it. We know from the surveys that the people of Luxembourg are somewhat lukewarm about the idea of enlargement. I do not think that our politicians are sufficiently committed to European issues.

About our interviewee

Ben Fayot (65), a Socialist Member of Parliament, City Councillor and long-time President of the LSAP (Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party), was a Member of the European Parliament from 1989 to 1999. Until 1984, Ben Fayot taught languages at the *Athénée de Luxembourg* secondary school. Since then, he has never left the political arena. Ben Fayot is acknowledged as a prominent expert on Europe.