

Pat Cox, Fathers with foresight showed the way

Caption: Extract from a contribution by Pat Cox, President of the European Parliament, to a joint publication produced by the European Commission in 2002 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). In his text, Mr Cox looks back on the institutional development of the ECSC Common Assembly, as precursor of the European Parliament, from its inception to the signing of the Rome Treaties in 1957.

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Fathers with foresight showed the way

Pat Cox

President of the European Parliament

[...]

The early years of the ECSC's Common Assembly

Let us now turn our attention to the role of the ECSC's Common Assembly in preparing the way for the subsequent European Parliament. The structure and functions of the Common Assembly were set out in Articles 20 to 25 of the ECSC Treaty. Article 20 specified that the assembly was to be made up of 'representatives of the peoples of the States' — actually appointed by national parliaments on an annual basis. (More radically, however, a Member State could choose to select its membership by 'direct universal suffrage' if it so wished — though none did.) The number of representatives reflected the populations of the Member States: 18 for Germany, France and Italy; 10 for Belgium and the Netherlands; and four for Luxembourg. Article 22 provided for the holding of an annual session of the assembly, and there also existed the possibility of holding extraordinary sessions if the Council of Ministers or the High Authority requested it, or if the assembly needed to deliver an opinion on an issue presented to it by the Council of Ministers. The High Authority was required to answer oral or written questions put to it by the assembly, though the Council of Ministers was not required to do so. Indeed no obvious mechanism of accountability of the Council of Ministers to the Common Assembly was provided for, which inevitably became the focus of much assembly attention over subsequent years.

The assembly was provided with the 'nuclear weapon' of a two-thirds majority censure motion against the High Authority, but given no role in the nomination of a replacement: this would still be in the hands of the Member States. Moreover the assembly was given no role in subsequent Treaty modification. It could, however, adopt its own rules of procedure, which was actually to prove more significant than might appear at first sight. The Common Assembly met for the first time in an auditorium in Strasbourg University, even though its secretariat was based in Brussels, and was later to meet for many years in the chamber of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, also in Strasbourg. This arrangement was supposed to be temporary, pending a decision by the Member States on the seat of the assembly. The assembly also rapidly came to the conclusion that its one annual session should be broken down into a series of part-sessions, which gradually increased in frequency.

At first, the assembly seated its members in alphabetical order, as in the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, but right from the start members began to collaborate on the creation of pan-European political groups, and in June 1953 the assembly adopted a modification to its rules of procedure which explicitly provided for the creation of such 'supranational' political groups. A minimum of nine members was required for the creation of a group, and such groups were allocated financial and staff resources. Seating by group membership then quickly replaced the alphabetical system. The assembly also quickly established an internal structure of standing committees in the areas of political affairs and foreign relations; the common market; investments, finance and production; labour policy; transportation, accounting and finance; and legal questions. Within these committees, responsibility for particular reports was allocated to individual 'rapporteurs', with little regard for their nationality. This concept has proved a successful one, still practised by the present Parliament.

The assembly was ever eager to increase its limited powers. On 2 December 1954 it adopted a resolution (based on the Teitgen Report) calling on the assembly itself to examine how it might extend 'political control' over the High Authority, as well as examining the possible modalities for direct elections to the assembly. In May 1955 a special working committee was established to investigate ways and means by which the assembly could exercise more power. The same plenary part-session also called for the strengthening of the ECSC's institutions. In November of the same year, during an extraordinary part-session, the special working party on European integration presented its report which, *inter alia*, called for

the assembly to strengthen its position by 'establishing direct contact' with the Council of Ministers, and proposed further measures to increase such contacts. Finally the Member States should consult the assembly before appointing the President and Vice-President of the High Authority. The rest, as they say, is history. The signing of the Treaties of Rome, the merger of the Communities in the mid-1960s, and the subsequent amendment of the EEC Treaty by the Single European Act, and the Maastricht, Amsterdam and (hopefully) Nice Treaties, have their origins in the provisions of the ECSC Treaty.

Thus we can also see quite clearly that the Common Assembly of the ECSC was very much the forerunner of the current European Parliament, and that the procedural and political innovations adopted by the Common Assembly have had a major impact on the current structure and organisation of the parliament. This means, of course, that the expiry of the ECSC is not a tragedy: the incorporation of coal and steel policy into the EC Treaty, with its codecision provisions, simply ensures the most effective use of those parliamentary powers which have their very origins in the political and institutional ambitions of the Common Assembly of the ECSC.

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