

'British Conservatives revive the battle over the seat of Parliament' from Le Monde (2 October 2002)

Caption: Fifty years after the establishment of the European Parliament, the location of its seat is still a contentious issue.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Colombani, Jean-Marie ; RRéd. Chef Plenel, Edwy. 02.10.2002. Paris: Société Editrice du Monde (SAS). "Les conservateurs britanniques relancent la bataille du siège du Parlement", auteur:Rivais, Rafaële , p. 6.

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British Conservatives revive the battle over the seat of Parliament

BRUSSELS

from our European bureau

Will the European Parliament dare to ask the Convention on the Future of Europe to revisit the issue of its seat? The British Conservative Euro-MPs certainly want it to do so, and they let this be known on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Parliament on 25 September when they distributed a confidential report by Julian Priestley, Secretary-General of the European Parliament, which assesses the additional cost of the dispersal of Parliament over three places of work — Strasbourg, Brussels and Luxembourg — at EUR 169 million a year and at no less than EUR 203 million after enlargement.

MEPs have been fighting the battle over the seat of the European Parliament for more than 20 years. Having secured the right to be directly elected by universal suffrage in 1979, they then laid claim to the right to choose their own place of work. Tired of commuting between Brussels, where most of the preparatory work on proposed legislation takes place, Strasbourg, where votes are taken at plenary sittings, and their own countries, they have adopted a plethora of resolutions calling for the seat of Parliament to be established close to those of the Commission and the Council, in other words in the Belgian capital.

As the law stands, however, it is up to the Heads of State or Government to determine where the European institutions should be based. France has fought tooth and nail to ensure that Strasbourg, which already hosts the Council of Europe, should be the venue for most of the part-sessions of Parliament. In 1990, François Mitterrand threatened to veto the allocation of seats to a whole range of European bodies unless the Bas-Rhin prefecture was confirmed in its parliamentary role. The German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, lent his support because of the special status of Strasbourg as a symbol of post-war Franco-German reconciliation, without which the unification of Europe would have been inconceivable.

Under a compromise reached at the Edinburgh European Council in 1992, the seat of the European Parliament was to be in Strasbourg, where 12 monthly part-sessions would be held. At the same time, however, in deference to the wishes of the MEPs — and of Belgium — additional part-sessions might be held in Brussels, which was also the venue for meetings of the parliamentary committees. As for the Secretary-General's administrative departments, they would be based in Luxembourg.

Orderly retreat

The terms of this compromise having been carved in stone in the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997, France believed it had won the war. In 1998, it stopped subsidising some flights connecting Strasbourg directly with Munich, Rotterdam, Hamburg, London, Rome and Madrid. This decision meant that the elected MEPs had to juggle with connecting flights and were subject to numerous delays. In protest, they decided to shorten the length of their part-sessions in Strasbourg: beginning in the year 2001, the Strasbourg part-sessions would only last for four days instead of five. France could do nothing about it, since the duration of part-sessions is not laid down by the Treaty.

Two years later, Parliament decided to forward to the Convention a detailed analysis of the cost of maintaining three places of work. It was with this in mind that the Secretary-General compiled his report. The orderly retreat by the British Conservatives was condemned by Margie Sudre, even though, as a member of the French RPR party, she belongs to the same Group of the European People's Party (EPP) as the Conservatives in the European Parliament. At the Barcelona European Council, which followed the election of Pat Cox, an Irish Liberal, as President of the European Parliament, Jacques Chirac also emphasised in the presence of Mr Cox that France was committed to the principle of maintaining the seat of Parliament in Alsace.

The British Conservatives hope to obtain the support of their Labour adversaries; after all, did not the parliamentary leader of the Labour contingent, the Blairite Simon Murphy, recently resign his post — now occupied by a left-wing adherent of Old Labour, Gary Titley — on the grounds that the 'Strasbourg

travelling circus', in other words the constant travel between Brussels, Strasbourg and MEPs' constituencies, was 'incompatible with the demands of a young family'?

Rafaële Rivais