

‘Which capital for Europe? The permanence of a temporary arrangement’ from Le Soir (22 november 1980)


Caption: Published on 22 November 1980 in the Belgian daily newspaper Le Soir, this article on the geographic dispersal of the European institutions looks back to 1951 to find the reasons for the situation and to trace its development.

Source: Le Soir. 22.11.1980, 94e année, n° 274. Bruxelles: S.A. Rossel. "Quelle capitale pour l'Europe? (I) La permanence du provisoire", auteur:De Waersegger, Serge , p. 23.

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URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/which_capital_for_europe_the_permanence_of_a_temporary_arrangement_from_le_soir_22_november_1980-en-51289154-9013-4f8b-90fb-9bc02cc2ffbf.html

Last updated: 05/07/2016



Which capital for Europe?

(I) The permanence of a temporary arrangement

If it is true that uniformity begets boredom, then European civil servants should have no cause for complaint. Their workplaces are spread over a distance of some 250 miles, between Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg, not to mention the Euratom centre at Ispra in northern Italy, the European Patent Office in Munich, the European University at Fiesole near Florence, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training in Berlin or the Joint European Torus (JET) nuclear research facility at Culham in England.

As far as the centres of decision-making are concerned, the effects of this dispersion are compounded by the fact that they were established as temporary solutions.

Why, then, are they so scattered, and why this sudden questioning of the whole set-up, 28 years after the creation of the Coal and Steel Community and 22 years after the establishment of the Common Market and Euratom?

Decisions can be taken in the European Community, it seems, only by people living out of suitcases, and this phenomenon has been raised to an art form by the system of European political cooperation, through which the Member State governments coordinate their foreign policies. These political-cooperation meetings are traditionally held in a city in the country holding the Presidency of the European Community. Each Member State presides in turn, in alphabetical order, for a period of six months. On 23 July 1973, for example, the Foreign Ministers held a political-cooperation session in Copenhagen in the morning before hopping on a plane for Brussels, where they met in the afternoon as the Council of Ministers of the Community, a body which is bound by the founding treaties to convene in Brussels.

The European Commission, which prepares and implements decisions, is also based in Brussels, but some of its departments, such as the Office for Publications and the Statistical Office, are based in Luxembourg. The Economic and Social Committee, which brings together representatives of management and labour at European level, is based in Brussels. The Court of Justice, the Court of Auditors, the European Investment Bank and the financial institutions — yet to be established — have each been assigned their seat in Luxembourg.

The European Parliament has its Secretariat and administration in Luxembourg. Its parliamentary committees and party offices are based in Brussels, while its public sittings are divided between Strasbourg and Luxembourg.

Nobody wants a capital

The seeds of this grotesque situation were sown in 1951. The negotiations for the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community — the ECSC — had just been concluded, and five participating governments turned to the sixth, Belgium, with an offer to make Brussels the capital, but their offer was greeted with embarrassed silence. The fact was that the Belgian Parliament, supposing that it would fall to this country to host the new institution, had unilaterally offered the honour to the city of Liège!

Joseph Bech, the Foreign Minister of Luxembourg, saved the day by proposing that the capital be located in the Grand Duchy. There was, however, one problem: Luxembourg did not have a Chamber that could accommodate the parliamentary assembly of the ECSC. Not to worry — Strasbourg could let it use the premises of the Council of Europe on a temporary basis.

The ECSC was the first component of an institutional quartet on which a strong and united Europe was to be built. It remained to establish the European Defence Community, the European Economic Community and Euratom. The first of these was vetoed by the French Parliament, but in 1954, satisfied by the welcome that they had received in Luxembourg, the governments of the Six suggested that the centre of gravity be located

once and for all in Luxembourg.

This time it was the Grand Ducal Government that rejected the proposal. The Catholic Church feared that a huge wave of Protestant incomers would result from the influx of Eurocrats, while the opinion was voiced in various political quarters, and was shared by the Grand Duchess herself, that the little country was in danger of losing its identity under a deluge of foreigners.

Paul-Henri Spaak, the Belgian Foreign Minister, stepped in to rectify the mistake made a few years earlier by offering Brussels as the provisional seat of the new institutions; this offer was accepted, although the Parliamentary Assembly remained the guests of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

Evolution

Things evolved from there — first of all in people's minds. Until the Rome Treaties were concluded, the dominant philosophy underlying European integration was imbued with a spirit of European federalism. All of this preparatory work was to culminate in a great entity into which each country would be integrated without losing its own identity. From this perspective, it was logical to envisage a single capital as the centre of political decision-making, with a role akin to that of Washington, for example. These ideas had been encouraged by the sense of revulsion engendered in the aftermath of the Second World War by the dreadful ravages of nationalism. In these circumstances, the European melting-pot seemed to offer a guarantee of peace.

In 1958, General de Gaulle came to power, resolved to restore France's national pride. Then came the start of the 'golden sixties', when the Cold War eased off, people's comfort and well-being improved, and the need to stand shoulder to shoulder no longer seemed to be quite so pressing. All of this would have an impact on the ideal of European unification.

At another level, the existence of three different institutional structures for the ECSC, the EEC and Euratom was universally regarded as a waste of resources. It was, therefore, decided to combine all three into a single structure, the European Communities. This immediately posed a problem with regard to the seats of the institutions. The restructuring plans meant that there would be one single Commission. That of the ECSC, however — the High Authority — was based in Luxembourg, while the seats of the EEC and Euratom Commissions were located in Brussels.

This was the starting point for an initial round of negotiations, which, under the treaties, only the national governments were empowered to conduct — to the exclusion of those very institutions which were directly affected.

Another development had occurred since 1958. The governments of the three host countries — Belgium, France and Luxembourg — had come to appreciate the benefits derived from the presence of these institutions. Accordingly, each was anxious to minimise any loss.

Compromise

Finally, France's fears that a European capital would lure it into a supranational federal Europe in which national sovereignty would be eroded made the French Government averse to any talk of a single seat.

It was symptomatic of a general change of perception that the other governments rallied to the French position. Multicentrism thus became the outward sign of the philosophical limits of European integration.

There only remained the question of compensation. Luxembourg lost the Commission of the ECSC and its administrative departments to Brussels.

As the price of its acceptance, Luxembourg secured an agreement that the text of the compromise would be linked to the basic treaties; in legal terms, this meant that it could be amended only by another agreement, one which would have to be adopted unanimously. This was destined to have a profound effect on the current

debate about the seats of the European institutions.

Compensation, moreover, was not simply a matter of legal guarantees. The compromise also confirmed that the Court of Justice and the Secretariat of the European Parliament were to remain in the capital of the Grand Duchy. The new Commission, though centralised in Brussels, nevertheless located some of its services in Luxembourg, namely the Statistical Office, the Directorates-General responsible for scientific and technical information and for credit and investment, and the Computer Centre. A Publications Office was also set up there. In addition, the Brussels-based Council of Ministers would also meet in Luxembourg for 3 months out of 12.

Lastly, the compromise mapped out the future role of Luxembourg as a legal and financial centre. This is why the city now houses the European Investment Bank, the Court of Auditors and the European Monetary Cooperation Fund, the embryo of a European Monetary Fund.

Strasbourg was confirmed as the venue for plenary sittings of the European Parliament and Brussels for the meetings of the parliamentary committees.

Each of the signatory countries, however, was aware that this was only a compromise. Accordingly, they were careful not to carve the arrangements in legal tablets of stone. The wording of the compromise therefore specifies that the seats of the institutions are provisional. There is nothing more final, however, than a temporary arrangement. That, at least, was the received wisdom until the election of the European Parliament by universal suffrage in June 1979.

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