

# 'A parliament for Europe: origins and transition' from Lëtzebuenger Journal


**Caption:** Article from the Luxembourg daily newspaper Lëtzebuenger Journal of 28 January 1977, looking back over the institutional development of the European Parliament from its establishment to the adoption by the Council, on 20 September 1976, of the decision enabling the holding of the first election by direct universal suffrage. Until the elections, therefore, the European Parliament becomes a Parliament in transition. The article also explains the powers of the European Parliament as well as the situation of the political groups in July 1976.

**Source:** Lëtzebuenger Journal. Politik, Finanzen & Gesellschaft. 28.01.1977. Luxemburg: Editions Letzeburger Journal S.A. "Ein Parlament für Europa. Bilanz und Übergang".

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## A Parliament for Europe — origins and transition

**According to the founding treaties, the European Parliament is to consist of the representatives of the peoples of the nine States brought together in the European Community. Throughout its existence, Parliament has inferred from this statement that its primary mission is to ensure that this Community should not remain the preserve of bureaucrats, economists and industrialists but should become a matter of importance to the peoples of Europe.**

### The first European elections

The present Parliament hopes that the first European elections, scheduled for 1978, when more than 180 million enfranchised Europeans will elect 410 Members of the European Parliament in free and secret elections by direct universal suffrage, will represent a leap forward towards more effective pursuit of its mission. The decision to hold direct elections was reached by the Heads of State or Government on 12 July 1976. The precise implementing provisions still have to be laid down by the parliaments of the Member States.

The Community framework that has been established to date with regard to the European Parliament is as follows: the directly elected European Parliament will comprise a total of 410 representatives of the people. There will be 81 British, 81 French, 81 German and 81 Italian Members as well as 25 Dutch, 24 Belgian, 16 Danish, 15 Irish and 6 Luxembourg Members. Their term of their office will be five years. The Parliament that is elected in 1978 on the basis of the electoral legislation of each Member State — elected directly but still very differently from one country to another — is to draw up uniform European procedure for subsequent elections. These principles were enshrined in a legal instrument which was signed on 20 September 1976 but which still needs to be ratified.

The European elections are to take place ‘simultaneously’ in every country. To put it more precisely, they will be held within a period stretching from Thursday to Sunday in order to take account of the various national electoral traditions. It will be possible, but not compulsory, for the directly elected Members of the European Parliament to hold a seat in their respective national parliaments. Time will tell whether this dual burden will prove sustainable for MEPs in the long run.

The prospect of direct elections is already arousing controversy among the various political forces and parties about the future political orientation of the Community. It has generated a powerful impetus for cooperation between like-minded national parties and has resulted in the formation of federations of parties and in pledges to present the voters with common electoral manifestos.

By dint of the resolution on direct elections, the present Parliament has become a sort of transitional parliament for the final two years of its life; its main function will be to ensure that its working methods and experience, but first and foremost the powers that it has fought to secure in a quarter century of parliamentary debate, are handed down as a legacy and a binding commitment to the first European Parliament to be directly elected by the people. The achievements of the Members of the European Parliament prior to 1978 will largely determine the scope for action that is available to the elected Members who take their seats in that year and who will, henceforth, be directly accountable to the electorate in the European context.

### The road to direct elections

The road to direct European elections has been a long one. The idea was mooted back in 1948 at the Hague Congress, the first major European ‘brainstorming session’ after the Second World War. The principle of direct elections was incorporated in 1951 into the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community, with each Member State being given the option of having its Members of the European Parliament directly elected.

In practice, however, none of the Member States exercised that option. The number of seats was so small

that it was impossible to establish a meaningful link between the elected and the electorate. Moreover, the role of the ECSC was too specialised for it to offer any hope of an enthusiastic public response at the polls. The principle of direct elections was clearly incorporated into the Treaty with a view to the future development of the Coal and Steel Community, whose founders, of course, regarded it as the first step on the way to a European federation. This development received its first serious setback in 1954 with the failure of the plans to form a European Defence Community; the time, it seemed, was not yet ripe for bold political initiatives in the European unification process.

This, however, did not spell the end of direct elections. In 1957, a fresh bid for progress resulted in the signing of the two treaties that established the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), in which direct elections were presented as the future norm in all of the three communities. The treaties did not, however, specify a target date. The European Parliament was merely entrusted with the task of drafting an appropriate instrument. On 20 June 1960, it presented a draft agreement to the Council of Ministers. Not until 1969, however, did the Council, under pressure from the European Parliament, put the issue on its agenda. In December of that year, the Hague Summit issued the appropriate instructions.

The decisive phase began with the mandate issued to the European Parliament by the Heads of State or Government on 10 December 1974 to draw up a new set of proposals. Parliament responded immediately. In January 1975, the House adopted a new draft agreement by an overwhelming majority. On the basis of this submission, the Heads of State or Government, at their Brussels Summit in July 1976, reached the aforementioned compromise, albeit with some changes of emphasis compared with the parliamentary draft. It is now up to the national parliaments to lend legal force to the European framework by ratifying the agreement.

### **Parliament today**

Until 1978, the European Parliament will continue to comprise the 198 Members appointed by the national parliaments from within their own ranks. The developments that occur between now and then, experiences relating to the composition and organisation of parliamentary bodies and any changes made to parliamentary procedures on the basis of the Treaties will be enshrined in the larger Parliament.

The three European Communities rooted in the Treaties of Paris and Rome — the ECSC, Euratom and the EEC, which remain separate only in terms of their legal identity — have always been thought of as staging posts on the way to a united Europe, a Europe which has to be built up gradually. They form the core of the process of European unification, which now extends to areas not covered by the Treaties, such as the coordination of the Member States' foreign policies under European political cooperation, in which the Community institutions, including the European Parliament, are steadily becoming more deeply involved. Most of the powers of the European Parliament, however, relate to the activity of the Communities in the narrower sense, in other words chiefly to the realms of economic and social policy. Parliament is the institution with responsibility for monitoring and advising the Commission and, to a certain extent, the Council on behalf of the people of Europe, and it also has limited scope for autonomous decision-making.

### **Legislation**

All areas of Community policy are the subject of discussions between the Commission and Parliament. When the Commission presents a proposal, Parliament normally delivers an opinion in the form of a resolution. These resolutions are the instrument with which Parliament may influence the final decisions taken by the Council. In the case of proposals with financial implications, Parliament has further scope to exert influence through the annual budgetary procedure.

### **Scrutiny**

The European Parliament exercises its right of scrutiny in various annual debates. This is the framework in which it regularly discusses the general report presented by the Commission, the statements made by the

Council, the Community budget and the social situation in the Community. Other debates are conducted in cases where, in the opinion of Parliament, the political situation so warrants. Representatives of the Council and the Commission always attend these debates.

Its powers of scrutiny, however, bear chiefly upon the work of the Commission, which is accountable to the European Parliament and may be compelled to resign by a parliamentary vote of censure. It may also make appropriate direct responses to current events with the aid of parliamentary questions to the Commission, the Council and the Conference of Foreign Ministers.

### **The budget**

The budgetary powers of the European Parliament are the main instrument through which it exercises its right of scrutiny. In the European Communities, Parliament and the Council are jointly responsible for controlling the purse strings. In the annual discussions on the budget, they are required to engage in dialogue with a view to reaching a consensus. There are some expenditure categories on which Parliament has the last word, subject to certain conditions. In general terms, its negotiating position is strengthened by the fact that, in the event of a conflict, it may reject the entire budget.

### **Stronger powers?**

Are these powers adequate, given the current level of European integration? In the view of the present Parliament, they are not adequate by any means, for, although Community laws are directly binding on all citizens of the Community, the European Parliament does not have the final say in legislative matters; while the Community's financial resources have been placed entirely beyond the control of the national parliaments, the budgetary powers of the European Parliament are far less extensive than those of any national parliament.

Accordingly, the process of strengthening the powers of Parliament still has a long way to go. In 1975, a new agreement was signed on the allocation of greater budgetary powers. In Paris, on 10 December 1974, the Heads of State or Government approved an increase in the powers of Parliament, particularly in the legislative domain. This commitment must be honoured.

### **The political groups**

As in any freely elected parliament, it is in the parliamentary parties and other groupings of like-minded Members that political aims are formulated. These political groups are committed to ensuring that their specific position on the issues of the day is reflected in the decisions of the House and of the parliamentary committees. The multinational composition of the European Parliament itself compels it to subordinate national considerations and conflicts of interest to the quest for common solutions to Community problems.

As a rule, 14 Members are required for the formation of a political group; ten Members will suffice, however, if they come from at least three different Member States. As of July 1976, the following political groups were represented in the European Parliament:

- the Socialist Group, with 66 Members from 12 Socialist or Social Democratic parties in all the Community countries,
- the Christian Democrat Group, with 51 Members from 12 national parties in Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands,
- the Liberal and Allies Group, with 26 Members from 13 national parties in all Community countries except Ireland,
- the Group of European Progressive Democrats, with 17 Members, of whom 11 are Gaullists and allies from France, five are from the Irish Fianna Fáil party, and one represents the Danish Progress Party,

— the European Conservative Group, with 17 Members — 16 from the United Kingdom and one from Denmark, and

— the Communist and Allies Group, with 15 Members — nine from Italy, four from France, one from Denmark and one from the Netherlands.

It goes without saying that the Members of the European Parliament are under no obligation to belong to a political group. Representatives of smaller national parties sometimes remain ‘non-attached’.