

'The shape of the European Parliament' from El País

Caption: On 31 July 1979, the Spanish daily newspaper El País outlines the composition of the European Parliament elected for the first time by direct universal suffrage and depicts the personality of Simone Veil, elected President of the House.

Source: El País. 31.07.1979. Madrid. "La formación del Parlamento Europeo".

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The shape of the European Parliament

Presided over by a Giscardian, Simone Veil, and led by a conservative majority which covers a spectrum ranging from a very quiet centre to an outspoken right, the European Parliament is setting out on a path shrouded in mist. Its role as an institution is unclear, deliberately so, and is unspecific. In the light of that fact, it is not possible to overstate the importance of the Presidency, which will want to give shape, a style and a personality to this institution, hitherto lacking in such virtues (neither had it been based until now on a popular vote, and the view of European political life is that the popular vote provides legitimacy and security to those who believe that the vote is in their favour); especially if the person holding the Presidency, as in the case of Simone Veil, has a vocation for politics and the all-important desire which are justified by her talent.

Yet the European Parliament is not a goal in itself: its Members do not appear to have overcome the spur of nationalism, and, in all probability, Mrs Veil is not intending to reach the high-point of her political career there; instead, she is setting out her stall for standing as a candidate for the Presidency of the French Republic when the time is right. Even her inaugural speech was more discussed in France than in Community circles because it raises issues of domestic politics and the European Parliament, such as the plan for Parliament to become a supranational institution, a matter on which General de Gaulle did battle long ago, as do his heirs, the Chirac group and the Communists, now. The very fact that Simone Veil insisted repeatedly on using the word 'Parliament' instead of the word 'Assembly', a fairly subtle distinction, was viewed as provocative by the Gaullists because of the implication that 'Simone Veil has brought us the blueprint of a new European power whose structure, admittedly, is unclear, but whose existence is very real' (*Lettre de la Nation*), whereas the Communists take the view that 'the new President has placed a Europe on the agenda which would be very far removed from a Europe of independence; it would instead be a supranational Europe' and point out that she was elected by 'the worst kind of reactionaries who are so great in number in the European Assembly, namely the ill-chosen conservatives of Great Britain, the neo-fascists of the Italian Social Movement and the friends of Franz Josef Strauss, the enemies incarnate of reducing tension' (*L'Humanité*).

On etymological grounds, the Assembly ought to be a meeting, a way of bringing together or reconciling diverse national interests, and Parliament should be a body for the general discussion of major supranational issues. Simone Veil not only used the dreaded word, she has clearly explained that what Parliament cannot do is merely administer resources if it does not have the right to raise, scrutinize or direct them, and such rights are political in nature.

The philosophy of the institution has been interpreted in very different ways; there are no established precedents, because the previous Parliament, or Assembly, was purely a verbal, decorative body, despite the fact that it was, on many occasions, a platform for a unanimous voice on certain issues, principally in relation to human rights or issues of principle. It will exist from now on and will perform its role, when it has one, even as it is taking shape, and it seems determined to take a role on. The size of its conservative nucleus is substantial and dangerous, specifically in a situation where foundations are being laid, but the reality is that that nucleus is the result of free votes and reflects the right-wing tendency of the electoral majorities in the nine countries which send Members to Parliament. One day, the situation may be quite different, and then a difficult battle will have to be fought. As things stand, the European Parliament is representative of the instruments of business, of influence, of power in Europe. Wholly improperly, the word 'Europe' is used in respect of only nine of that continent's countries, but, for now, they are the nine countries which hold the reins of economic power. And still they fight over it.

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