

'Parties divided at Community level before elections to European Parliament' from El País (5 November 1978)

Caption: On 5 November 1978, two days prior to the launch of the election campaign in France for the first elections to the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, the Spanish daily newspaper El País publishes a report on the difficulties experienced by the national political parties to pursue joint courses of action at Community level, thus preventing them from drawing up common election manifestoes.

Source: El País. 05.11.1978. Madrid. "Los partidos, divididos a nivel comunitario ante las elecciones del Parlamento Europeo", auteur:Fidalgo, Feliciano.

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Parties divided at Community level before elections to European Parliament

French Socialists launch their European election campaign on Tuesday

One hundred and eighty million voters in the nine countries of the European Economic Community (EEC) will go to the polls next June to elect the 410 Members of the first European Parliamentary Assembly to be elected by direct universal suffrage. Throughout the Community, preparations for this historic step towards integration are a daily concern. In France, the activity of the political parties is mainly determined by the European elections and enlargement of the Common Market. The launch of the Socialist Party's campaign in Lille next Tuesday and Wednesday will be attended by all the leaders of the Socialist International. On the 12th of this month, the Gaullists will be holding an extraordinary congress to determine their European policy. The communists are also making preparations. The President of the Republic, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, will devote a large part of his press conference on 21 November to this subject. Our Paris correspondent, Feliciano Fidalgo, reports.

Feliciano Fidalgo

'Europe means hope', runs the slogan on the posters for France's European election campaign, which will cost ten million francs (around 160 million pesetas), paid for out of the EEC's budget. The public relations firm Havas has been commissioned to help mobilise the 37 million French voters who will take part in the June 1979 poll which will establish the first European Parliament elected by direct universal suffrage. Despite the sometimes heated controversy in the nine Member States about the significance and powers of the future Parliament, and despite the difficulties which the various political movements in the EEC are still encountering in drawing up common manifestos, the unprecedented importance of next year's election is recognised both in the Community itself and in other regions and countries (the USSR, USA, China, the Third World and Japan) that are major world players. While the future parliamentary assembly is not intended to have supranational powers, once elected, it will set in train the integration of the human, economic and social resources of nine of the world's richest countries. That will probably be a very slow process, but it is irreversible and will enable the Community to exercise considerable influence on world affairs.

The legal basis for the election of the European Parliament in June 1979 is the Treaty of Rome, which established the EEC on 25 March 1957. It stipulates that the European Parliamentary Assembly shall consist of 'delegates' or representatives elected by universal suffrage.

Until now, the European Parliament has been composed of 'delegates'. In other words, it has represented the countries of the EEC indirectly, since the 'delegates' in question were appointed by the national parliaments of each of the nine Member States. This explains why the powers of the present European Parliament are minimal, not to say non-existent.

In theory, the European Parliament monitors the activities of the Brussels Commission and the Council of Ministers, but, in practice, the concern of each Member State for its own interests has almost entirely prevented the exercise of that power. Parliament also has consultative powers and is involved in drawing up the annual budget of the Communities.

The bone of contention

The main disagreement between pro- and anti-Europeans with respect to the election of the new Parliament by universal suffrage concerns its future powers. If they are to remain the same, i.e. negligible, then why make Parliament representative by electing it by direct universal suffrage?

Only time will reveal why the French Communists have become the most fervent opponents of European integration, seconded by the Gaullists. For different reasons, both movements have raised the banner of the sacrosanct nation state. Both distrust the European Parliament as a devil in disguise bent on infiltrating the

Europe of the nations and dissolving them. And, last week, both movements announced they would be boycotting the campaign to promote the European Parliament on state television.

Unable to prevent the election, the anti-Europeans are being as cautious as possible about the criterion of its success or failure, namely the turnout in the nine countries. In theory, the majority of citizens in the Community countries are in favour of a directly elected parliament. Statistics and opinion polls have been showing for some years now that around 70 % of the EEC electorate supports the election of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. The Italians, Luxembourgers and Dutch are the most European. The UK and Denmark are the most reticent.

Mobilisation of the electorate depends on the political parties of each country. In France, in particular, they have concentrated their activities on preparations for the election. The various political movements in the Community have taken some steps towards combining their efforts in this crucial area, but, with only eight months to go, what is most noticeable is the difficulties that they are encountering.

Party federations

Conduct of a European election campaign should involve the establishment of European political platforms that lend cohesion and meaning to the common instrument to be established. For the moment, despite several years of effort on the part of the political parties of the Nine, not much has been achieved beyond declarations of intent.

Lengthy and laborious consultations have officially resulted in the creation of three federations of European political parties: the Confederation of Social Democratic Parties of the European Community, the Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties of the European Community, and the European People's Party, a grouping of the EEC's Christian Democratic parties.

These federations exist on paper, but they have not resulted in the establishment of common platforms for a united election campaign.

The Liberals and the Christian Democrats have each formulated joint political programmes, but only at the cost of compromise and ambiguity that cast doubt on their practical effectiveness. On economic issues, for example, neither movement has been able to clarify its commitment to free enterprise or the extent to which it is prepared to accept state planning.

The Christian Democrats have been unable to define clearly what social units other than the family they consider as fundamental constituents of society.

The Social Democrat Confederation has not arrived at a compromise in the strict sense of the word. Despite considerable efforts, the idea of a joint manifesto has been abandoned. Here, too, the economic issue was the greatest obstacle to agreement among the Social Democratic and Socialist parties. Four drafts on economic democracy were submitted by the various parties. While some simply involved workers' participation in supervisory committees, others proposed management by the workers. Nor did the nuclear issue figure in the Socialist draft manifestos, probably also because agreement was lacking.

As a result, the French Socialist Party has drawn up its own programme, which will be launched with great fanfare in Lille next week in the presence of all the leaders of the Socialist International, including those of the Socialist parties of the three countries that have applied for accession to the Common Market (Spain, Portugal and Greece).

All these issues show how difficult it is to organise joint election campaigns, although we should not forget that other obstacles have been overcome; a common manifesto drawn up by a national party with its foreign counterparts may irritate its domestic supporters. Many French Socialists, for example, are not prepared to endorse the Social Democratic theories of German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. Another problem is that parties which are competitors at national level (such as Gaullists and Giscardians in France or Liberals and

Republicans in Italy) could find themselves part of the same federation at European level.

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