

Jacques Delors steps down and the new Santer Commission takes office

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The European Parliament elections took place in the 12 EU Member States from 9 to 12 June 1994. The turnout was even lower this time round with an average of only 56 % of the electorate going to the polls, compared with 58.5 % in 1989, 61 % in 1984 and 63 % in 1979. This figure varied considerably among the Member States. The countries where voting was more or less compulsory came out on top: Belgium 90 %, Luxembourg 86 %, Italy 74.8 %. In Greece, the turnout was 71.2 %. Closer to the average figure were Germany, now reunited, with 61.1 %, Spain 54.6 %, France 52.7 % and Denmark 52 %. Those countries with below-average turnout were Ireland, with 44 %, Portugal 35.7 % and the Netherlands 35.6 %. Turnout in the United Kingdom also remained poor at 36.4 %. The three future Member States, which did not participate in the European elections, would send their representatives to the European Parliament from January 1995. These would initially be delegated by their national parliaments, then elected by universal suffrage.

The number of MEPs was adapted accordingly to take account of the reunification of Germany, which now had 99 MEPs instead of 81. The number of MEPs in France, UK and Italy increased from 81 to 87, in Spain from 60 to 64, in the Netherlands from 25 to 31, and in Belgium, Greece and Portugal from 24 to 25. Denmark still had 16 MEPs, Ireland 15 and Luxembourg 6. The 12 EU Member States had a total of 567 MEPs, the Fifteen now had 626.

The political composition of the Parliament altered very little. The Socialists and the European People's Party (centre-right) remained by far the biggest political groups, with 198 and 157 seats respectively (half of the MEPs from the new Member States would belong to these two groups). The other political groups were much smaller. To secure an absolute majority, a compromise had to be reached, essentially between the two larger groups.

The new European Parliament's first task was to assist in the appointment of a new European Commission. The Treaty on European Union provided for MEPs to play an active role in this process. Hitherto, they were able only to adopt a motion of censure — although they had never done so — on the Commission appointed by the Council of Ministers alone. In Maastricht, Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany had secured a five-year term of office for the Commission, to coincide with that of the European Parliament. Accordingly, following the European Parliament elections, it was necessary to replace the Commission appointed in January 1993.

Jacques Delors, President of the Commission since January 1985, had accomplished a great deal in his ten years in office, most notably his decisive contribution as a catalyst for the introduction of the single market, the Social Charter and the Treaty establishing economic and monetary union. He was not initially a federalist, but he was pragmatic in his view of European integration. He did not envisage nations losing their own identity in a greater Europe, but he recognised that intergovernmental cooperation was extremely inadequate and that a 'federal mechanism' should therefore be developed with the ultimate aim of establishing a 'Federation of Nation States'. However, the governments of the UK and other countries were concerned by these federalist tendencies and by the greater political clout of the Commission. They wanted a new President.

At the Corfu European Council, held on 24 and 25 June 1994, France and Germany supported the appointment of Jean-Luc Dehaene, the Belgian Prime Minister whose Presidency of the Council in the second half of 1993 had been particularly effective. Other countries expressed their support for this candidate, but the British Prime Minister, John Major, used his veto, believing Dehaene to be a federalist. He would not allow this prominent figure to follow Jacques Delors's policy on integration for another five years. Taking over the Presidency for the second term of 1994, Chancellor Kohl searched for another candidate. He convened the Extraordinary European Council on 15 July, and an agreement was finally reached on the name of Jacques Santer, Prime Minister of Luxembourg, who was more acceptable to the British.

According to the provisions of the EU Treaty, the European Parliament was required to give its assent to the

appointment of Jacques Santer. Given the bad feeling surrounding his appointment, this was narrowly secured on 21 July. The new President then exercised his right — recently enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty — to review government nominations for the other Members of the Commission. For its part, the European Parliament required every one of the nominees to appear before it, exceeding the provisions of the Treaty, in order to assert its role. Jacques Santer, having imposed his authority during this long process, completed on 29 October, finally secured European Parliament approval for the new Commission on 18 January 1995 with a larger majority than expected (416 votes to 103, with 59 abstentions). It was appointed by the governments of the Member States on 23 January and took office for the period 1995 to 2000.

The new Commission comprises 20 Members, as opposed to the previous 17. President Santer is assisted by two Vice-Presidents, Sir Leon Brittan from the UK and Manuel Marin from Spain. Among the new Commissioners are a number of prominent figures: Edith Cresson, former French Prime Minister; Neil Kinnock, former leader of the British Labour Party; Mario Monti, the eminent Italian economist; Yves-Thibault de Silguy from France; Emma Bonino from Italy. Several Members of the Delors Commission were re-appointed in the Santer Commission: Sir Leon Brittan; Hans van den Broek, former Netherlands Minister for Foreign Affairs; Karel Van Miert from Belgium and Martin Bangemann from Germany.