

'Right-wing, regionalist men' from El País (16 January 1994)

Caption: On 16 January 1994, a few days prior to the appointment of the first members of the Committee of the Regions, the Spanish daily newspaper El País analyses the composition of the new body created by the Maastricht Treaty in accordance with criteria concerning representativeness at both regional and local level, political affiliation and gender.

Source: El País. 16.01.1994. Madrid. "Varones, de derechas y regionalistas", auteur:Bassets, Lluís.

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Right-wing, regionalist men

The Committee of the Regions, the EU's newest institution, will be a conservative, traditional body

Lluís Bassets, Brussels

Most of the members of the Committee of the Regions, the institution established under the Maastricht Treaty in order to strengthen relations between individual citizens and the European Union (EU), will belong to right-wing parties, to be more specific 97 as against 76 from left-wing parties. The regions, which are traditionally conservative, will also have more representatives (99) than the municipalities, which tend to be more progressive (90). Most relevant as regards the gender aspect of European political life is that there will be only 17 women in the 189 seats, the equivalent of 9 %, which makes the level of participation by women lower than in any other European institution or body.

Women account for 51.2 % of the population of the Twelve, but their representation in the European Parliament is only 19.13 %; it is 12.3 % in the national parliaments of the Twelve as a whole (varying between 33 % in Denmark and 4.7 % in Greece).

Women's level of participation on the Committee of the Regions will be barely 9 %, a figure even lower than their presence in the central governments of the twelve Member States of the EU, which is 12.6 % on average (ranging from 24 % in Holland to 7 % in the United Kingdom).

The highly macho and conservative hue of local and regional life, where male political barons have power, is reflected in the figures for women's involvement in the Committee of the Regions to which several countries are sending only one woman, with only one country, Ireland, sending anything approaching balanced numbers (three women out of nine seats).

The figures improve somewhat (15 % of participation) when alternates are taken into account; but alternates are, in many instances, auxiliary posts which provide assistance to politicians and are of the principal private secretary or general secretary variety which, so it would seem, are much more suited to women.

The Committee of the Regions does not, as yet, have a very clear-cut role in the political life of the EU, as the Maastricht Treaty confers purely consultative duties on it in very specific areas (education, vocational training, youth, culture, public health, trans-European transport networks, telecommunications and energy, the structural funds and, more specifically, the Cohesion Fund).

The President of the Commission, Jacques Delors, and his advisers take the view that the first few months of the life of the new institution will flesh it out and will give an outline of the opportunities for making the most of it in the future, principally in 1996 when there will be a revision of the Treaty and it will be possible to propose that its powers be extended.

The composition of the Committee and the lack of enthusiasm shown to date by some of the top-ranking politicians who could be presiding over it have begun to engender a degree of concern at the European Commission.

The Committee ought to have held its constituent meeting by 15 January, according to a recommendation adopted by the Summit of Heads of State or Government of the Twelve, but it will not be technically possible for it to do so until well into February or even the first few days of March.

The oldest member will convene the constituent meeting of the Committee. The City of Luxembourg Councillor, Léon Bollendorf, aged 79, will call its members to the meeting and prepare a formal sitting at the seat of the European Parliament in Brussels. The Committee will have a Secretary-General, a post which the Germans, who are prepared to give up the Presidency for it, want for themselves. There will be several Vice-Presidents, and that will enable a balanced Bureau to be established which will include representatives of the various major political tendencies.

The only pressure groups which are currently organised and preparing for the election already are the Assembly of European Regions, whose leader is the President of the Catalan Parliament, Jordi Pujol, and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, whose President is the Mayor of Barcelona, Pasqual Maragall.

Candidates

Neither of these two associations has nominated an official candidate for the Presidency as yet. A structure based on political appointments presents far greater difficulties than in the EP, and the view is that they will carry less weight than usual for the whips. Three candidates have already made known their intention to stand for the biannual Presidency: Jacques Blanc, France, President of the Languedoc-Roussillon region, who is a member of UDF (Union for French Democracy); Luc van den Brande, Belgium, President of the Regional Government of Flanders, a member of the CVP (Fleming Christian People's Party); and a Councillor for the Strathclyde region, Scotland, Charles Gray, Labour.

Some months ago Maragall's advisers said that he might stand, but for the moment he is still being viewed as an undeclared candidate. Pujol has expressed his lack of confidence in a body which includes representatives of the municipalities and has been very unenthusiastic even about regular involvement in the Committee sittings.

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