

European Community



European Community Information Service
350 Sparks Street, suite 1110, Ottawa, Ontario K1R 7S8

BACKGROUND NOTE

GIVING EUROPE'S CITIZENS A DIRECT SAY

First Elections To European Parliament To Be Held in June

By Jennifer Lewington, a Canadian journalist specializing in political and economic affairs. Last year she spent seven months in Europe studying the European Community.

European Community voters go to the polls between 7 and 10 June this summer to elect, for the first time, their own representatives to the European Parliament. Long a goal to give the nine-member Community's 260 million citizens a stronger political voice in Community affairs, direct parliamentary elections mark an important step in the EC's 29-year integration process. But how will a directly-elected Parliament affect the future course of integration? And how will elected spokesmen alter the balance of power between Parliament and its three sister institutions? These questions are of special interest not only to the Community of the 1980s, but to trading partners, such as Canada, concerned with closer economic links with the Nine.

The Parliament, whose members currently are appointed by national parliaments, is the forum for debating public issues in the Community. Euro-MPs sit according to party, not country, thus providing a pan-European counterweight to its institutional "adversaries" - the Commission and the Council of Ministers. The Commission, a collegial body primarily engaged in policy-making, reports to the Council, made up of one representative per member-state, which is the EC main decision-making body.

Influential Role

Parliament is, at once, more than and less than traditional parliaments. While it has decisive power to censure and dismiss the Commission, Parliament can make only limited adjustments to 30 per cent of the Commission-drafted Community budget (currently around \$20 billion) - or reject it outright. Primarily a consultative and advisory body, Parliament cannot initiate legislation. However, through its 12 committees which broadly match those of the Commission's departments, Parliament can play an influential part in policy development. Finally, the assembly can summon the Commission for questioning, while the Council of Ministers responds to Parliament's queries by convention, not law.

../2

Since its first sitting in 1952, Parliament's membership and informal powers have evolved so that the assembly exerts an increasingly influential role in Community affairs. For that reason - even though the 1976 decision by heads of government to hold direct elections gave no extra powers to Parliament - Parliament's new status as a democratic, political body should add further to its responsibilities in Community policy-making.

A direct voice

For some, that is all to the good, especially if citizens have a more direct voice in determining their future. Excluding referenda held before and after enlargement in 1973, EC voters have never been asked to endorse such central issues as the common policy for agriculture or EC links with non-member countries. Others, however, are determined that a Community assembly not overstep its authority and infringe the sovereignty of national parliaments. Jacques Chirac, leader of the Gaullist party (and Mayor of Paris), for example, has been campaigning strongly against any increase in the Parliament's powers, as spelled out in the EC treaties, after it is directly elected. In Britain, too, the Parliament's role has caused keen controversy.

In light of national concerns about the role of Parliament in the EC, it is not surprising that decisions on new structural and voting procedures for the assembly have been implemented slowly and after much debate. Direct elections were first envisioned in the 1951 Treaty of Paris and specifically authorized in the 1957 Treaty of Rome. In the early 1960s, the Parliament's efforts to establish a draft convention for holding elections were ignored and only in 1974, following new proposals, did the Council commit itself to direct elections. With final agreement on a convention for elections in 1976, planning went ahead for a 1978 election. Voting was postponed a year to give the United Kingdom more time to work out its electoral procedures for a June 1979 election.

Five-year term

The reconstituted Parliament will have 410 members (currently 198) with seats distributed on a basis largely corresponding to population: 81 members each for United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy; 25 for the Netherlands; 24 for Belgium; 16 for Denmark; 15 for Ireland and six for Luxembourg. Members will be elected for a five-year term and, while they may also serve as members in their own national parliaments, the burden of twin mandates is likely to limit dual roles.

Euro-MPs following June will be paid the same as members from national parliaments, with salaries paid from member state budgets and subject to national tax. Travel and other allowances paid by the European Parliament will supplement their salary. They will represent constituencies of about one-half million people each, but the final location of the future Parliament is as yet undecided. At present, its main week-long, monthly sessions take place in Strasbourg, France, but it also meets in Luxembourg, the assembly's administrative headquarters; committee sessions are generally held in Brussels. All debates in committee and assembly are simultaneously translated and published in the six official languages of the Community: English, French, Danish, German, Italian and Dutch.

In preparation for the election, some political parties already represented in Parliament have regrouped along broader political lines to present joint manifestos to the electorate. Other parties now in the assembly either do not plan a common front or are having difficulty agreeing on one. Groups currently not represented in the assembly, such as environmentalists, will participate in the campaign, which opens officially in May. Among the leading personalities who have already agreed to run are former German Chancellor Willy Brandt and French Socialist Party leader François Mitterand. For those parties already represented in Parliament, some election financing aid is available (about \$13.2 million this year), in addition to state funding where it is provided. The Commission and Parliament are spending an additional \$4.8 million this year for non-partisan electoral information.

EC polls last year showed that the percentage of voters who would "certainly" turn out ranged from 34 per cent in Germany to almost 70 per cent in the Netherlands. Whatever the political results of the world's first international elections, the June vote will herald an important test of the political will to develop a stronger European Community.

	Voters in millions	Seats	Voters per Euro-MPs	Polling Day	No. of constituencies and method of voting
Belgium	7.0	24	291,600	Sunday	3 Constituencies Proportional Representation
Denmark	3.5	16	218,000	Thursday	1 Constituency, Proportional Representation (Denmark 15 seats. Greenland 1 seat with simple majority)
Germany	42.1	81	519,700	Sunday	Federal or Länder lists Proportional Representation (5% clause)
France	35.3	81	435,800	Sunday	1 Constituency Proportional Representation
Ireland	2.1	15	140,000	Thursday	4 Constituencies Single transferable vote
Italy	40.9	81	504,900	Sunday	5 Constituencies Proportional Representation
Luxembourg	0.2	6	33,300	Sunday	1 Constituency Proportional Representation
Netherlands	9.5	25	380,000	Thursday	1 Constituency Proportional Representation
United Kingdom	41.0	81	506,100	Thursday	81 Constituencies First-past-the-post England..... 66 seats Scotland..... 8 seats Wales..... 4 seats Northern Ireland 3 seats (by Proportional Representation)
EC	<u>181.6</u>	<u>410</u>			