

newsfeature

NF/3

February 14, 1975

MAJOR STEP TOWARD DIRECT ELECTION OF EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Washington, D.C. -- Two centuries after the United States, Europe is on the verge of having its first directly elected continental congress.

On January 12, the members of the European Parliament adopted a draft convention for election by universal suffrage on the first Sunday in May, 1978 -- the target date set by the European Common Market leaders at the December Paris Summit.

Commission President Francois-Xavier Ortoli hailed the Parliament's decision as "an important step toward a truly democratic Europe, and a major bridge crossed on the road to European Union."

The convention will go into effect once adopted by the Council of Ministers and subsequently ratified by the nine member state legislatures.

The new European Parliament would consist of 355 members -- double its current size--elected for five year terms. The present parliament-- which meets in Strasbourg, France -- is essentially consultative. It is made up of members from the nine EC legislatures. It has limited budgetary powers and the power to dismiss the European Commission -- the EC executive body.

Through universal suffrage, the parliament will gain new prestige throughout Europe -- thus strengthening its longstanding argument for a greater role in the running of the EC. Last year, the member states agreed to widen the parliament's budgetary controls and to move toward expanding its political powers within the framework of the EC goal of political union. Proponents of a stronger European Parliament argue that such a move is essential since the power of national legislatures is gradually being transferred to the EC institutions.

Representation is calculated by size of an EC country's population. Germany will have 71 seats, Britain 67, Italy 66, France 65, the Netherlands 27, Belgium 23, Denmark 17, Ireland 13, and Luxembourg 6. As they do today, parliamentarians will sit according to European party group, not according to nationality. The groups are: Christian-Democratic, Socialist, Liberal and Allies, European Conservative, Progressive European Democrats, Communist and Allies, and non-affiliated. They would not be subject to instructions from their national parliaments or government.

Members of the new European Parliament would still be allowed to belong to their member state legislatures. Some members hoped to abolish this provision; but the majority maintained that until the European Parliament has broader political powers, ineligibility for the national parliaments would mean loss of political influence in their own countries.

Elections will be held on the same day throughout the Community. Election rules -- voting age, minimum age of the candidate, incompatibilities, etc. -- will at first be the same as those of the national parliaments in each country. The plan calls for eventually achieving a uniform European procedure.