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Speech by the Commission Vice-President H. Vredeling to the Congress of the Association of European Journalists, The Hague, 6 October 1978

Are the elections for the European Parliament a living reality for the 250 million inhabitants of the Community? The motto which the organizers of your congress chose for my speech suggests that they are, but I am afraid that many people reading it will think: if only it were in fact so!

The campaign organizers are, I know, wisely holding their fire for another few months yet, but even taking into account the efforts they can be expected to make, I would be surprised if this first election stirs up much excitement about Europe.

European politics have regrettably, still not managed to penetrate far enough into the sphere of the European citizen's immediate interests and experience for such excitement to be generated; and the politicians and party activists who will be conducting the campaign are not setting the electors a good example as Europeans. The politicians and party activists are still behaving in too national a way; they probably feel forced into this approach by their supporters, who feel closer to their local regional base than they do to Europe.

This is also the main reason why it is proving so difficult or almost impossible to establish parties at European level. The political map of Europe is a chaotic picture, largely because of the intense confusion within the main political camps. People who are supposed to be party allies at European level look in fact more like enemies. For example, my own Dutch Labour Party and the West German SPD have differing views on important political issues, and the Dutch Christian Democrats prefer to keep aloof from their West German counterparts. In

Holland, the Socialists and Liberals have been political opponents for many years; in the United Kingdom, West Germany, and latterly also in Denmark, they are working together. The West German Christian Democrats sometimes appear to be kept together more by opposition to socialism than by anything else; their Italian counterparts, however, rely on Communists to keep them in power. By contrast, the alliance between the French Communist party and the PSF does not seem viable.

All these conflicts are of course easily understood - and often justified - by reference to the respective national historical background. But viewed from a European angle, the picture is one of utter confusion.

The campaign for the first elections to the European Parliament has no base in a European party-political infrastructure. It is likely that the campaign will be dominated by national rather than by genuinely European issues - if indeed, as is to be hoped, we manage to bring these into the campaign at all! The campaign for the European elections will probably be similar to the battles with which we in Holland are familiar in the run-up to the elections to the Provincial Councils. The main issues in the campaign tend to relate to national rather than to provincial politics, but the outcome is none the less valid for the composition of the provincial assemblies. That will apply just as much to the outcome of the European elections.

I do not believe that we need be too dismayed over the fact that European politics are not yet fully developed in all respects. The most elementary condition for their ever becoming so has at least been fulfilled: the European Parliament is at last to be directly elected. The fact that the Council of Ministers has been able to agree on this is the most important thing to happen in the Community for years. Amid all the stagnation and trouble we have had in the Community of late, we ought to acknowledge this as an achievement. But above all, we ought to make the most of the fact that the elections are indeed taking place and that a genuinely elected Parliament is about to take office,

in order to help the European Community achieve still greater things. The Parliament can become an important stimulus for the extension and further unification of Europe, provided it uses its institutional position well and takes the initiative in each situation. If it does so European issues will take on form and substance, and a European political infrastructure will no doubt emerge. For then the parties in the Parliament will be able to reach the European voters directly over the heads of the national parties. There is a much greater chance of the campaign for the 1983 elections really relating to European politics. Next year's elections are a first step, which by definition is always imperfect.

So let us begin by discussing the directly elected European Parliament's opportunities for gaining the position which properly belongs to a democratically elected representative assembly. There are two theories on this point, one optimistic and one pessimistic. The optimistic view goes that the directly elected Parliament will become a significant force by itself, that is to say by the mere fact of its having been directly elected and through the pressure of public opinion of which it will be a much more direct expression. The pessimistic view bases itself on the assumption that the Parliament, although directly elected, still has so few powers and is so badly organized that it will be incapable of achieving anything until these deficiencies are remedied.

I would oppose both these interpretations: the first because it is too passive and the reasoning behind it too mechanical; and the second must be refuted because it is too fatalistic. Both interpretations in fact fail to grasp the possibilities that exist for inventive, curious, intelligent, hard-working, bold, tenacious and dedicated members of Parliament to obtain, by steady pressure and constant badgering, the position that befits a popular assembly and its members.

I would like today to make a few random points, which will be very brief and hence perhaps too generalized, about the way in which the parliamentarians could and should do this work. I would like to put forward a few ideas on this.

1. A little under a hundred years ago, the Dutch Parliament gave the decisive push towards the abolition of child labour - and that in spite of the fact that at the time it hardly had any power. How was it done? By bringing to light through a public Parliamentary enquiry the appalling conditions under which children had to live and work. The enquiry revealed a situation which society could not and would not tolerate and was therefore forced to change. Parliament achieved this extremely important social reform not by drafting directives, laws or regulations, but by uncovering abuses and accusing those responsible.

I am not claiming that we can still expose such abuses in the present-day Community but there are still lesser evils for us to track down and fight. What is to stop the directly elected European Parliament finding a major outlet for its energies in such activities? Let it set up and equip a committee of enquiry to explore the realities of present-day society on a completely independent basis. Of course, witnesses cannot be made to come and give evidence, but I wonder who could afford to refuse a summons from a directly elected popular assembly.

2. The European Parliament is not totally lacking in formal powers - it does at least have the right to amend the budget and can, in the ultimate, refuse to approve the draft budget. At this very moment, Parliament and the Council are in conflict over the budget for 1979. Not everybody finds such conflicts equally exciting, certainly not at the beginning. And why not so? Because the interplay between Commission, Council and Parliament on the budget is threatening to become a standard routine. The Commission is suspected - justly or unjustly - of exaggerating its requirements in its preliminary draft budget. The Council then without fail goes precisely the opposite way by cutting more or less all the "meat" out of the Commission's draft. Parliament's reaction to this is equally predictable - it restores a large part of the cuts made by the Council, half of which the Council then removes again in the next round.

In the past, the story ended with a compromise of sorts being reached which Parliament would then dutifully approve. A couple of years ago, however, Parliament gained greater powers over the budget and it has been using these in an increasingly "political" way. More and more frequently, the annual procedure for the approval of the budget is tending to end in tough negotiations in the course of which Parliament has lately won a number of major victories. An unspectacular, laborious but vital battle is being fought here to increase Parliament's practical control over the budget. It is my view that direct elections will increase the political muscle of the European Parliament to such an extent that it will be possible to achieve much more rapid progress in this field.

3. Asking questions is the very essence of parliamentary activity. It is difficult for anyone who does not know the administrative machine from the inside to imagine the effect a written question by a Member of Parliament can produce. It may arouse fear or even mild panic. It may lead to irritation or a vague feeling of having been caught out. But great care and tact will nearly always be exercised in drawing up an answer, if only to avoid further problems.

4. On paper the European Parliament has no right of initiative but I would argue that it does have the practical power to take initiatives. Whilst Parliament is not empowered to put proposals for directives or regulations before the Council, no-one could prevent it adopting resolutions or motions specifying precisely what directives or regulations it would like to see adopted and precisely how these should be worded. Parliament could then dismiss the Commission in the event of it refusing to implement such resolutions or motions. The same is true of the power of amendment. Although Parliament has no such power in formal terms, in practical terms it could enforce acceptance of amendments.

5. A minute ago I mentioned Parliament's power to dismiss the Commission. Consideration is currently being given in Parliamentary circles to adding a refinement to this power by making it possible for Parliament to pass a vote of no confidence against individual Commissioners rather than just against the Commission as a whole. This would be done by declaring a member of the Commission "persona non grata" and thus excluding him entirely from consultations with Parliament. This is another possible way of extending and enforcing the practical powers of the European Parliament.

6. The foremost requirement for the European Parliament is quality - quality both in its discussions and in its decisions. The directly elected European Parliament should, so Professor Koopmans recently argued, become the centre of opinion-making in Europe. A high level of both expertise and political experience will need to be evident in Parliament's debates and decisions if it is to achieve this goal.

How can the directly elected European Parliament prove itself? The situation is undoubtedly less than satisfactory as regards formal rules and powers. But Parliament has one invaluable advantage - no power in the world can prevent its members asking questions or making comments. If a question is on target and the answer - usually from the Commission, sometimes from the Council - is evasive, then policy may often be very substantially influenced, particularly by the resultant publicity. And that, after all, is the ultimate point of these direct elections - to exercise democratic influence over those who regard themselves as the policy-makers.

