

The European Parliament celebrates its 50th anniversary : platform for European dialogue

Autor(en): **Schneider, Lukas M.**

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The European Parliament celebrates its 50th anniversary

Platform for European dialogue

The European Parliament was founded on 5 May 1949 as the first international organisation in post-war Europe. Although the Strasbourg-based organisation has never evolved to become the driving force of the European integration process, from the outset it has acted as a powerful draw.

The aim of the founding members of the European Parliament was to form a common platform for the pursuit of the rule of law and the preservation of human rights. However, attempts to endow the Strasbourg institution with a leading role in European

role is also due to its structure and the working methods of its various organs. To date the decision-making body has been the Council of Ministers, which is made up of Foreign Ministers of the member states and convenes at least twice a year. Every six months the chairmanship of the committee rotates to another member country. The Parliamentary Assembly has powers of supervision and consultation and is com-

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posed of delegates from the national parliaments. Sessions are held three times a year. The Assembly has an exclusively advisory function but can pass its decisions on to the Ministerial Committee in the form of recommendations.

Even if the Parliamentary Assembly has been accorded purely consultative powers since its foundation, its existence has proved fruitful. As a meeting point and forum for discussion it has played a key role in determining public opinion in Western Europe. It took Switzerland 14 years to become a member of the European Parliament in 1963. Why the long wait?

Federal Council's policy of neutrality

The Confederation's initially reticent attitude towards the Strasbourg institution is largely attributable to the government's policy of neutrality. Federal Councillor Max Petitpierre, who ran the Federal Political Department between 1945 and 1961, made no bones about his reservations and continually pointed to the political character of the European Parliament. In his opinion Switzerland, as a neutral country, had no place in an assembly that in the early days of its existence also debated defence policy issues. Consequently, it was several

years before Switzerland's relationship to the European Parliament was re-evaluated.

Step-by-step politics

The beginning of a gradual rapprochement to Strasbourg was heralded in 1960 by the appointment of a Swiss delegation of observers. The breakthrough on the path to membership was achieved in June 1961 with a letter from Bernese SP National Councillor Max Weber asking Federal Councillor Friedrich Traugott Wahlen, as Head of the Delegation, to examine the question of full membership.

This request was re-iterated a year later by Willy Bretscher, the influential Liberal Democrat National Councillor from Zurich. As rationale for his campaign he claimed that the European Parliament is based on the principle of cooperation between the states and is unable to make decisions that are directly binding for member countries, hence nothing stood in the way of Switzerland's collaboration from the standpoint of the right to neutrality. Bretscher therefore believed there would be no advantage in prolonging the wait-and-see policy. Indeed, it would only bring drawbacks, since sustained reticence would be regarded abroad as evidence of the selfish motives of which Switzerland was repeatedly accused.

As the new minister in charge of the Federal Political Department, Federal Councillor Wahlen confirmed that there were no longer any serious neutrality-related obstacles to membership. At the same time he underlined the advantages of full membership. With this, the dam was breached. The debate on membership passed through both chambers of the house without a hitch, and on 6 May 1963 the declaration of membership was filed in the Secretariat of the European Parliament. Switzerland's acceptance into this Strasbourg institution was couched in emotional terms. The newly-elected President of the Parliamentary Assembly went so far as to dub Switzerland the prototype for Europe, because of the way it united people of different origins, languages and religions peacefully. ■



Federal Councillor Wahlen signing the declaration of membership. On the right, Lodovico Benvenuti, General Secretary of the European Parliament. (Photo: Keystone)

integration failed. With the signing of the Treaty of the European Coal and Steel Community or Treaty of Paris in 1951, followed only six years later by the foundation of the European Economic Community, it became clear that the European Parliament would never become the core political and economic institution within the framework of European unification.

Its importance is accordingly to be viewed on a more intellectual plain. Common values were enshrined in the form of various treaties, the most enduring of which is unquestionably the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Civil Liberties.

European Parliament as an intellectual force

The fact that the European Parliament has been unable to play an influential