

The European Parliament, its powers, and the 1979 European elections

SUMMARY

This briefing traces the evolution of the debates on the European Parliament's powers, and their (dis)connection to the organisation of the first direct European elections in 1979. It spans the period leading up to 1979, and also assesses the aftermath of these landmark elections. It shows that well into the 1970s, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) put great effort into de-coupling the debates on organising Parliament's direct elections from those on expanding its institutional powers. MEPs' main fear was that demanding both as a package deal would be too much for Member State governments to swallow, creating a risk of ending up with neither. Separately pursuing more powers and direct elections was considered the smarter strategy.

Yet by the end of the 1970s, with progress being made on both fronts, it had become difficult for MEPs to maintain this distinction. Increasingly, MEPs pushed a discourse of a self-reinforcing, virtuous circle of empowerment and elections. They developed this discourse further after the 1979 elections, when a disappointingly low voter turnout dictated a re-coupling of the issues in order to maintain the momentum of the Parliament's growing empowerment. The briefing concludes by connecting this historical debate to contemporary issues, highlighting how the question of Parliament's powers has become intimately connected with questions of democracy, representation and elections.



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Introduction

What is the point of having a parliament if it is powerless to do anything? This was one of the core questions that the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) discussed throughout the 1960s and 1970s. It was a pertinent question, part of a larger debate on how the project of European integration could be democratised. In the post-war European representative democracies, parliaments played a crucial role, providing executives with democratic legitimacy, acting in the name of the people and holding governments accountable.

Yet, at the beginning of the 1970s, the European Parliament was ill-equipped to fulfil this role. MEPs were still indirectly appointed, and direct European elections were far from a given. Moreover, the European Parliament had only consultative rights on legislation and limited supervisory powers. In short, it was hardly recognised as a key institution in Europe's democratic set-up. By the end of the decade, however, Parliament had realised its own direct election, acquired budding institutional powers and managed to mainstream the idea that it was the foremost representative of European citizens.¹

At the core of these developments lay the questions of what institutional powers were appropriate for a parliament that was not (yet) directly elected, and whether elections should precede empowerment or vice versa. On the one hand, could an indirectly appointed parliament legitimately claim legislative and supervisory powers? Should Parliament not first gain legitimacy by virtue of being directly elected, before being empowered? On the other hand, would it make sense to organise direct elections for a parliament that had few powers to exercise? Would citizens recognise the importance of European elections if the institution they were to elect had nothing to say?

This briefing traces the evolution of that debate in the lead-up to the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, and assesses how it evolved in the aftermath of these landmark elections. It shows that in the period before the 1979 elections, MEPs put great effort into de-coupling the debates on organising Parliament's direct elections from those on expanding its institutional powers. MEPs' main fear was that coupling both in a package deal would be too much for Member State governments to swallow, creating a risk of ending up with neither. MEPs considered pursuing more powers and direct elections separately the smarter strategy. Yet by the end of the 1970s, with progress being made on both fronts, it had gradually become more difficult for MEPs to maintain this distinction. Increasingly, MEPs pushed a discourse of a virtuous circle of empowerment and elections that are mutually reinforcing. They developed this discourse even more after 1979, when a disappointingly low voter turnout seemed to demand a re-coupling of the issues in order to maintain the momentum of the European Parliament's growing empowerment.

The briefing concludes with a brief overview of the steady expansion of Parliament's powers over the years since 1979. It connects the historical debate to the recent attempt by the Parliament to (re-)introduce the lead candidate (*Spitzenkandidaten*) process for the European elections, which is essentially about tying the elections and Parliament's authority as elected body to its power to appoint the European Commission and have a meaningful impact on the EU's decision-making. In sum, the briefing illustrates how the question of powers has been part and parcel of Parliament's debates since its very inception, and has become intimately connected with questions of democracy, representation and elections.

De-coupling power and elections: The road to 1979

The question of how the European Parliament's powers relate to its direct election was a key part of internal debates on European elections from the very early years of discussion on this topic. When MEPs were discussing the preparation of the European elections in the (late) 1950s, many asked whether it made sense to have direct elections for a parliament that had no powers, or argued that demands for direct elections should go hand in hand with demands for more powers. For instance,

during a meeting of the Working Group on European Elections in The Hague in 1959, German socialist Ernst Albrecht Metzger captured this mood when stating:

If one wants the future Parliament to be truly effective and representative, one must also include an extension of its powers. A Parliament elected by universal suffrage, which has a significant number of Members but has such limited powers as currently provided for by the Treaties, can only bring discredit to democracy and the parliamentary system because such a large number of Members can only talk and will have nothing to say.

This Working Group was chaired by Belgian socialist and European federalist Fernand Dehousse. Over the course of 1959, it held many rounds of consultations with European and national politicians and experts in different locations – Brussels, The Hague, Paris, Rome, Strasbourg, Bonn and Luxembourg. The aim of the Working Group was to assess whether and how European elections could be organised, and what kind of institution a future European Parliament should be. Metzger was far from the only one to express doubts about the viability of a European Parliament with no powers. For instance, during the Working Group's meeting in Luxembourg in November 1959, then vice-president of the Luxembourgish Christian-Social People's Party (CSV) Pierre Margue said that 'these [European] elections will lose a lot of their real significance if they are not accompanied by this expansion [of powers]'. Similarly, back in The Hague, French conservative Jean Legendre stated that 'it makes little sense to hold [European] elections if the future Parliament would have the limited powers it has today'.

Still, the majority of participants in the Working Group, including its chair Dehousse, were in favour of de-coupling the debates on expanding the powers of parliament and on securing its direct election. This de-coupling strategy had both normative and strategic dimensions. On the one hand, there were strategic concerns that demanding the national governments of the Member States agree to both an institutional expansion of the European Parliament's powers and political empowerment of Parliament through direct elections would be asking too much, especially while Charles de Gaulle was president of France. As one national expert who participated in the Working Group's Rome meeting put it:

When it comes to the expansion of the Parliament's power, it would be better to wait until after the Parliament is directly elected, because, if one asks governments for both elections and powers, it will be difficult to acquire both and the risk exists one achieves nothing at all.

On the other hand, there was a firm belief that holding European elections would provide the future Parliament with such political authority that it would become impossible to deny it an extension of its institutional powers, such as stronger control over the European Commission or equal footing with the Council. During the Working Group's The Hague meeting, French socialist Maurice Faure – who in 1958 briefly held the position of French Minister for European Institutions – expressed the idea that holding European elections has a double purpose:

In the first instance, the peoples of Europe will become more closely involved in the European ideal, and consequently the elected Parliament will be able to develop a dynamic power that will enable it to expand its own powers.

MEPs broadly shared these high expectations regarding the effect of holding European elections. Even the somewhat critical Legendre said he was convinced that 'the new Parliament, once brought into being, will be able to derive from the fact that it is directly and democratically elected enough authority to expand its powers'. During the Working Group's Brussels meeting, its chair Dehousse

Figure 1 – MEP Fernand Dehousse speaking in the hemicycle, 1960.



Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

succinctly framed the arguments as such: 'The powers depend on the elections, not the other way around'.

The results of the discussions that took place in the Working Group on European Elections were compiled in the 1960 [Report on the Election of the European Parliament by Direct Universal Suffrage](#). On the question of the Parliament's powers, the report recommended that 'the matter of direct elections and expansion of the powers of Parliament should be kept separate'. The idea was not so much that powers should come only after elections, but rather that the discussion on the European Parliament's powers should in no way interfere with or risk postponing the direct elections of the Parliament, which MEPs considered the more pressing matter. For one, the report argued that, while issues such as the coordination of energy and trade policies might seem more urgent, 'all important problems the Communities are facing are essentially political questions, the resolution of which requires political will'. Moreover, building on the normative arguments made earlier, the report restated the working group's belief in the transformative power of European elections:

The election of Parliament should come as a salutary shock to the peoples of the six countries. Only from their conscious participation in it will emerge the resolution that can sustain the Community project in a way that goes beyond the circumstances, differences of opinion and particularistic considerations of the moment.

As such, the idea at the time was that the European Parliament should pursue an expansion of its powers separately from its demand for direct elections. For some time, this distinction held steady, with the debate on Parliament's powers developing largely independently from the [push for direct elections](#), which focused mainly on 'preparing public opinion' and informing the general public about European affairs. However, if talks about expanding the powers of Parliament seemed to yield (small) results – particularly in the budgetary area – European elections were time and again postponed by the Member State governments. This triggered MEPs to connect arguments about the need for direct election to democratic standards in terms of parliamentary oversight of Community decision-making and implementation.

Today, the European Parliament is established as one of the EU's major political institutions. It has far-reaching budgetary powers, and in many policy areas it is a co-legislator on equal footing with the Council of the EU as per the ordinary legislative procedure. During the first decades of European integration, however, the Parliament's role was chiefly consultative. From the very beginning, therefore, many MEPs urged Member States to grant the European Parliament more powers. For instance, in 1963 the Parliament issued a [Report on the Tasks and Powers of the European Parliament](#) – also called the 'Furber Report', after its rapporteur, German Christian democrat Hans Furber, who was President of the European Parliament from 1956 to 1958 and again from 1960 to 1962. In addition to stressing the Parliament's fundamental role in 'express[ing] the variety in public opinion and the general interests of a people', the report listed a number of what it called 'necessary changes' to be made in order for the European Parliament to become 'a real parliament and not just an advisory assembly'. These included granting the Parliament the right of initiative and the right to appoint the European Commission, and expanding its power to hold the executive accountable.

Some of these ambitious goals remain out of reach even today, but one of the main areas in which MEPs successfully managed to expand the European Parliament's powers at the time was in its control over the Community's budget. Whereas today the Parliament and the Council jointly constitute the budgetary authority in the EU, originally such powers were vested in the Council alone. This first changed with the 1970 [Treaty amending certain budgetary provisions](#), which gave the Parliament a say on 'non-compulsory expenditure'. However, this amounted only to a very small part of the budget – initially 3 % – with the Council maintaining the right to the last word on the vast majority of the budget (the 'compulsory expenditure').

While MEPs welcomed this extension of their oversight powers, they quickly started pushing for further expansion in this area. In 1973, Parliament issued an [interim report](#) on its budgetary powers, written by French socialist George Spénale, who would later serve as European Parliament President

from 1975 to 1977. In the interim report, Spénale argued that control over the implementation of the budget would be the logical next small step, while also aiming for a much bigger leap in the form of greater decision-making powers for the EP:

Although it is clear that to some extent the reality of budgetary powers is conditioned by the effective possibility of controlling implementation of the budget on the revenue and expenditure sides, it is clear that the essential feature of budgetary powers resides in the Parliament's real influence on decisions which determine the major sums appearing in the budget and on the preparation of the annual budget.

Importantly, while the Parliament repeatedly stated that the debate on powers and direct elections should be kept separate, it regularly referred to democratic standards in its demands for more (budgetary) powers. For example, in a 1973 plenary debate, German socialist Hans Lautenschlager stated rather forcefully that 'unless those with the power of decision within the Community find a way of gradually increasing Parliament's competence ... direct election of this Parliament would be pointless, a mere charade'. He even went as far as to argue that 'the movement towards political union must founder on this problem'. Somewhat less drastically, Spénale's final [report](#) unmistakably argued that an expansion of the Parliament's budgetary powers would significantly strengthen the Community's democratic quality:

In any parliamentary or modern democracy 'political majority' presupposes a balance between the institutions, in which the Parliament has real powers. This is therefore one of the most important of the current debates. ... By giving the European Parliament a power of co-decision in the determination of the Communities' own resources ... we should be taking a step in the direction of a better democratic balance in the Communities.

The Parliament was not unsuccessful in its pursuit. Indeed, the introduction and expansion of the Community's own resources, over the implementation of which the Parliament had a greater say, necessitated closer collaboration between Parliament and Council. In 1975, a Joint Declaration of the Parliament, Council and Commission instituted the practice of conciliation between the Parliament and the Council, supported by the Commission, for Community legislation with significant financial impact. In addition, the 1975 [Treaty amending certain financial provisions](#) gave Parliament the right to propose modifications to the budget, give discharge to the Commission in respect of the implementation of the budget, and reject the budget in its entirety. No substantial modifications were made to this system until the Treaty of Lisbon introduced budgetary co-decision.²

As Parliament's power expanded, the debate on its direct election became increasingly acute. As the above discussion on the 1959 Working Group made clear, the idea that the Parliament should be directly elected, and that these elections were a matter of urgency, was already present early on in European integration. The societal turmoil of the late 1960s, culminating in the '1968 movement', put the question of democratic innovation ever more prominently on the political agenda at both the national and European levels.³

The European Council's [Paris Communiqué](#) of December 1974 raised expectations among MEPs. It not only recognised that 'the election of the European Assembly by universal suffrage ... should be achieved as soon as possible', but also that 'the competence of the European Assembly will be expanded in particular by granting it certain powers in the Communities' legislative process'. In

Figure 2 – European Parliament President George Spénale (right) joking with journalists, 1976.



Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

response (having discussed the issues for over a decade already), the European Parliament immediately put forward its Draft Convention in January 1975, aiming for the organisation of European elections in 1976. Yet it took the Council until October 1976 to respond with an act in which it formally confirmed that 'the representatives in the Assembly of the peoples of the States brought together in the Community shall be elected by direct universal suffrage' – though still no official date had been put forward.

MEPs were becoming increasingly impatient with the lack of progress being made in realising direct European elections. Moreover, with the progressive achievement of Parliamentary budgetary powers in the first half of the 1970s, they began pushing harder on the electoral front. For instance, in 1976 alone, the Parliament issued three separate resolutions – in May, July and October – specifically on the topic of Parliamentary elections, in each of which it 'regrets' the failure of the Council to take a decision and 'deplores' postponement. In doing so, it became ever more difficult for MEPs to maintain the distinction between demanding direct elections and pushing for further extensions of Parliament's powers. Dutch socialist Schelto Patijn captured the mood during a speech he delivered in a European Parliament plenary session in 1975:

The real political significance of direct European elections lies ... in the fact that they are held at all. Opponents of direct elections have been telling us for long enough that the European Parliament must have power before it can be directly elected, while at the same time withholding these powers from Parliament on the hypocritical grounds that we are not directly elected.

Faced with this conundrum, MEPs increasingly framed direct elections and additional powers together as democratic necessities for the European project. During a European Parliament [plenary debate](#) on European elections in 1975, German socialist Manfred Schmidt, speaking for the Socialist Group (though contrarily to his Dutch socialist colleague Patijn), stated straightforwardly that 'there is no dividing line between powers and elections'. He qualified his bold opening line as such:

In the long term, there can be no direct elections to a Parliament which has no powers. ... It should nevertheless be stressed that this Parliament must stand on two legs, that it must be legitimised [sic] directly by the citizens, but that it also needs the powers to be able to tell the citizens what they are voting for, what their representatives in this House intend and are able to do for the citizens of Europe. ... We shall not really be able to say that the democratisation of this Community is complete until the constant task of fighting for increased budgetary and legislative powers for this House has been ended, until these powers are granted in full, and until Parliament is elected by universal suffrage.

In particular, arguments about powers and arguments about elections fused in the demand for granting the European Parliament more legislative and oversight powers, so as to enable it to exercise democratic control over the other Community institutions. Importantly, several MEPs framed this in terms of compensating for national parliaments' loss of power. For instance, Irish Fine Gael MEP Charles McDonald argued that 'if the powers of national parliaments are on the decline, they can only be counterbalanced by a minimum effective representation in this Parliament'.

Given how these MEPs were still dual-mandated – meaning they were first elected to national parliaments and then given an indirect mandate to sit in the European Parliament – many had a very good view of the difficulties their national colleagues were having in holding their governments to account with regard to their activities at the European level, let alone in holding the European Commission accountable. Part of the argument for levelling-up the European Parliament was that it was the only institution that could perform this democratic function. German Christian democrat Egon Klepsch, who would later become the first chair of the EPP group in the elected European Parliament, and Parliament's President from 1992 to 1994, made this point very clearly during the above-mentioned 1975 [plenary debate](#):

In years past, we have rightly been increasingly critical of the fact that there is a widening gap as regards opportunities to influence and supervise measures taken by the Council of Ministers outside the provisions of the Treaty, since the national parliaments have relinquished more and more powers.

They often do not fully realise the extent to which they no longer have a say in matters, but we here see very clearly that this lacuna in democratic supervision, of representation of the will of the peoples, must be eliminated. This, I believe, was why the [European Council]⁴ realised that the step towards a directly elected European Parliament had to be taken.

Figure 3 – Parliament President George Spénale (left) meets with Commission President François-Xavier Ortoli, 1976.



Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

Parliamentary oversight remained a fixture in the debate over the following years, oftentimes framed in terms of 'restoring' the balance of power between European institutions. Importantly, not only did MEPs claim such a restoration necessitated the direct election of the Parliament, but they also increasingly made such claims in the context of their oversight ambitions towards the Council and the Commission. For instance, during a [plenary debate](#) in 1977, French Gaullist Pierre-Bernard Cousté said he believed 'that direct elections will serve above all to restore the balance of power within the European Community – or in other words to create a more democratic form of supervision, and to establish direct control of that new institution, the European Council'. During another [plenary debate](#) that same year, Scottish Nationalist Winnie Ewing expressed the strong opinion that 'if this Parliament is going to lick into shape the men who sit on that bench over there [i.e., the European Commissioners], we must be elected directly from our countries'.

While some Member State governments, like those of the United Kingdom and Denmark, were more reluctant than others to strengthen the Community's supranational character, the Commission explicitly supported Parliament in its ambition. Commission President François-Xavier Ortoli – a French Gaullist – stated as much during a 1975 [plenary debate](#) on the introduction of European elections:

Europe is advancing towards a new institutional equilibrium on a democratic basis. There is a logical link, which cannot be denied, between the election of Parliament by universal suffrage and the whole question of the European institutions. To envisage the direct election of your Assembly amounts effectively to raising the problem of Parliament's legislative powers, given its added political weight and, ultimately, to anticipating developments towards European Union and the general institutional equilibrium it will bring about.

This again highlights the increasing difficulty MEPs experienced in keeping debates on power and elections separate, despite efforts to that effect. For instance, during the same 1975 debate, Patijn stated that Parliament must 'make it quite clear that the one does not depend on the other' (referring to power and elections, respectively), while two sentences later proclaiming that 'once we have acquired legitimacy by virtue of our direct link with the European voters, we shall have an even more legitimate right to demand that the governments grant us powers'.

Clearly, a majority of MEPs was by now convinced of a virtuous circle between powers and elections, whereby the achievement of one would enable the realisation of the other. Particularly, direct elections were expected to give Parliament an undeniable claim to power. More than once, MEPs assumed that the legitimacy and authority the European Parliament would gain following its direct election would naturally lead to an expansion of its powers. The Draft Convention Parliament proposed to the Council in January 1975 summarised this logic as such: 'The more powers Parliament acquires, the greater is the pressure for the legitimacy conferred by direct elections; and the sooner direct elections are achieved, the stronger the argument for the conferment of wider powers'.

At the same time, many MEPs acknowledged that European elections were not the final goal, and did not presume the attainment of additional powers would follow automatically. To be sure, they considered empowerment a logical consequence of being directly elected, but many recognised that it was not an inevitability. Rather, they emphasised that elections were a necessary – but only a first – step in Parliament's assumption of its true democratic role as representative of the people of Europe. The democratisation of the European project itself remained the primary goal. Irish Fianna Fáil MEP Michael Butler Yeats developed this line of thought at length when speaking for the Group of European Progressive Democrats during the 1978 [plenary debate](#) on European elections:

One must of course accept that no amendment is likely in the immediate future to the Treaty of Rome to provide for a change in the legal powers of the Parliament. But what in fact is the real basis of the influence of any Parliament? The influence wielded by a Parliament in a democracy is not merely a reflection of its legal powers. The democratic process is a complicated one. The elected member of a democratic parliament performs his task in a variety of ways. He seeks to represent his constituents by means of his detailed and careful scrutiny of legislation, by his constant questioning of the activities of the executive, by his speeches in debates designed to reflect and at the same time to influence the development of public opinion. No one need doubt for a moment that the 410 directly-elected members will be in a vastly stronger position for achieving these democratic ends once they can claim to be the direct representatives of the 250 million peoples of the Communities. The change will not come automatically, or overnight. The mere coming of direct elections will in itself change nothing. The new Parliament will have to work at its task of being a directly-elected Parliament. What it becomes will be a matter entirely for itself.

Figure 4 – MEPs Charles McDonald (left) and Michael Butler Yeats in Strasbourg, 1976.



Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

Re-coupling power and elections: The aftermath of 1979

The first direct European Parliament elections of 1979 were a momentous historical occasion. The very act of engaging millions of Europeans in a joint transnational democratic exercise was a triumph of post-war European integration. For Parliament itself, its direct election made manifest a clear increase in its legitimacy, authority and prestige as the foremost representative institution at the European level. As Commission President Roy Jenkins stated during the newly elected Parliament's [solemn sitting](#) of 18 July 1979:

This week the European Parliament, democratically elected by over 100 million citizens of Europe, comes of age. ... It is an opportunity to demonstrate to millions of our citizens that their votes really mattered and to convince those who abstained.

However, although the coming-of-age narrative was certainly popular among MEPs, Jenkins' words hint at a darker side of the 1979 elections: the need to convince the large group of citizens that had abstained. Today, a turnout of 62 % would be considered a success, but at the time, when turnout in national elections was significantly higher on average, many considered it disappointingly low, an indication of public disinterest in and disengagement with European affairs that posed a threat to the future of European elections and thereby to the European project itself. During the same solemn sitting, Belgian Socialist Ernest Glinne, speaking as leader of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, pointedly assessed what he called the 'real significance' of the 1979 elections:

With the exception of Italy, the rate of absenteeism was enormous. Even in a country like Belgium where voting is compulsory there were up to 25 % of spoiled and blank votes and abstentions. There is a lesson to be drawn from this. Europe has still not made a sufficient impression on its people; most of the citizens of Europe do not feel themselves really concerned by the Community which they accuse of bureaucracy, secrecy and a failure to influence the daily lives of the men and women at whom its action is directed. ... All the institutions of the Community, first and foremost the elected Assembly, must now more than ever before make a great effort to acquire more credibility ... if institutional Europe is to become a people's Europe and if, in particular, the Parliament is not to become dangerously denatured by 1984 into an incomprehensible talking-shop with Byzantine ways.

This credibility with citizens that Glinne contended Parliament so crucially lacked was interpreted by many MEPs primarily in terms of the institution's powers to influence the decision-making process and control the other European institutions. A major voice echoing this argument was Belgian Christian democrat Leo Tindemans, leader of the EPP group. Also speaking during the solemn sitting, he argued that to safeguard successful future elections, Parliament 'must acquire prestige through the quality of its work and the quality of its debates'. Moreover, he powerfully articulated the crux of the issue in stating that 'it would be a most dangerous venture to mobilise 180 million electors only to find afterwards that Parliament is powerless or cannot use its power and do exactly what the electors are looking to us to do'.

After working to de-couple the quest for direct elections from the question of institutional empowerment in an attempt to get the Member States on board throughout the 1960s, MEPs found it increasingly difficult to do so in the 1970s, as direct elections became a real prospect. After 1979, with elections fully realised, the European Parliament set out to explicitly re-couple these two issues, in an attempt to leverage its newly acquired legitimacy and authority to gain more formal powers. As Tindemans' quote shows, MEPs considered empowerment not merely a logical result of being directly elected, but also crucial to increasing citizen engagement in European elections and maintaining the process of democratisation of the European project.

Tindemans himself stated at the time that Parliament 'shall only manage to overcome [citizens' scepticism] if [it] discharges its full responsibility and fulfils the promises made by us during the election campaign'. During the same solemn sitting, British Conservative MEP James Scott-Hopkins explicitly connected Parliament's new status to its role in European decision-making when arguing that 'from now on, when the views of the Parliament are set aside, it is the views of the people who elected us that are being ignored, not just us'. Looking ahead to 1984, and using very similar wording as Tindemans, Scott-Hopkins further stressed that Parliament needed 'to demonstrate that we have kept the promises that we all of us in our different ways have made this year, and that accordingly this institution, this Parliament, is something which is worth the electors voting for and continuing to support'. Commission President Jenkins recognised that the Parliament was 'commanding a new democratic authority' and expressed the institutional consequence of this new authority:

It is right that [the EP] should exercise to the fullest possible extent its powers to question and to subject to criticism the way in which the Commission exercises its powers and the way in which the Council of Ministers reaches or does not reach its decisions.

Figure 5 – MEP Leo Tindemans during a plenary session, 1982.



Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

Jenkins' support for Parliament's claims to power shows that MEPs were not alone in making this connection between empowerment and being directly elected. The quest for more powers for Parliament received a major boost from the 1981 [Draft European Act](#) – better known as the 'Genscher-Colombo Plan', as it was a joint initiative by German Foreign Affairs Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher and his Italian counterpart Emilio Colombo.⁵ In 1981, these two national ministers put a draft text to the European Council with the aim of relaunching the European integration project, among other things proposing a significant expansion of the powers of the European Parliament:

The Heads of State or Government reaffirm the central importance of the European Parliament in the development of European Union, an importance which must be reflected in its direct involvement in the decision-making process and by its review function.

Parliament would be empowered through a series of new initiatives, such as regular reporting by the Council to the Parliament, an expansion of the areas where Parliament was involved in decision-making, consultation of Parliament in the appointment of new Commission Presidents, and investiture debates for all incoming Commissioners. These proposals sparked quite some debate in the Parliament, and it became increasingly clear that Genscher and Colombo, while proposing limited reforms, bought into Parliament's argumentation that its direct election warranted an expansion of its powers. For instance, during a 1982 [parliamentary debate](#) on the plan, Colombo stressed that conferring on Parliament the power of oversight 'falls within the scope of the democratic debate between the executive and the legislature, a prerequisite of which is the exercise by this Parliament of real power in the joint decision-making process'. This connection was made even more explicitly later in the debate by Genscher, who expressed his argument to applause from MEPs:

The belief in parliamentary democracy lies at the heart of the Community's political order. The activities of the Community must therefore be founded on a democratic basis and subject to parliamentary control. This is the mandate that the House has obtained from its electorate by virtue of being directly elected. It can legitimately demand that its powers should be commensurate with this mandate.

Though the Genscher-Colombo Plan as such did not come to fruition, it gave further weight to Parliament's claims to power and calls for institutional reform⁶ following the 1979 elections, and particularly supported its re-coupling of both issues. For example, Parliament's 1982 [Interim Report on the Draft European Act](#) – called the 'Croux Report' after its rapporteur, Belgian Christian-democrat Lambert Croux – asserted that European decision-making should take place 'within the context of a democratic Community, in particular involving the European Parliament, which, being directly elected, is the legitimate representative of the citizens of Europe'. During a 1983 [parliamentary debate](#) on this report, former French Prime Minister Pierre Pflimlin, who served as President of the European Parliament from 1984 to 1987, captured the core of the democratic argument for Parliament's empowerment, justifying it 'not because of our abilities or our personal qualities but because we are the spokesmen for millions of Europeans'.

Power to Parliament: An ongoing process

Since 1979, the European Parliament has seen a slow but steady expansion of its institutional and political powers. The first major expansion of the Parliament's powers after the 1970s occurred with the 1986 [Single European Act](#), which introduced the cooperation procedure in certain policy areas and the assent procedure for accession and association treaties. In 1992, the [Maastricht Treaty](#) further consolidated Parliament's position as co-legislator with the Council by extending the cooperation procedure and introducing the co-decision procedure, while also strengthening Parliament's powers of scrutiny of the European Commission. The [Amsterdam](#) and [Nice](#) Treaties went further down this road, expanding Parliament's legislative and supervisory powers. Finally, the 2007 [Lisbon Treaty](#) constituted a major expansion of the co-decision procedure for all major European policy areas, renaming it the 'ordinary legislative procedure' and thereby putting Parliament on an equal footing with the Council.

While Parliament used the democratic argument throughout these decades to support its claims to power, turnout in European elections decreased continually until 2019. That the progressive empowerment of the Parliament apparently did little to convince citizens to come out and vote eventually caused a shift in the debate on democracy at the European level. While in the 1980s the discussion on democratising the European project focused strongly on expanding the (oversight) powers of the European Parliament,⁷ later arguments shifted focus towards the European elections – or rather, how these were 'second order' national elections.⁸ Parliament's recent attempts to (re-)introduce the lead candidate (*Spitzenkandidaten*) process connecting the European elections to Parliament's power to appoint the European Commission not only aim to 'Europeanise' these elections,⁹ but also go to show how Parliament's powers and its crucial role as a representative body in European democracy are intimately connected.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Pittoors, 2023.
- ² For a more elaborate discussion of the process relating to these budgetary reforms, please see Knudsen, 2008.
- ³ Conway, 2020.
- ⁴ Klepsch refers here to the European Council meeting held in Paris in 1975, at which Member States issued the Communiqué confirming direct European elections.
- ⁵ For a more elaborate discussion of the Genscher-Colombo Plan, please see Cuccia, 2018.
- ⁶ For a more elaborate discussion of the post-1979 Parliamentary debate on institutional reform, please see Kaiser, 2018.
- ⁷ For instance, see Williams, 1991.
- ⁸ Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Føllesdal & Hix, 2006.
- ⁹ Kotanidis, 2023.

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