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SUMMARY OF MR VREDELING'S ADDRESS TO THE UTRECHT EUROPEAN ELECTIONS
COMMITTEE ON 3 APRIL 1979

In his address to the Utrecht European Elections Committee Mr. Henk Vredeling, Vice-President of the Commission, spoke of the lessons that Europe could learn from the history of the growth of the Dutch nation-state and the development of the United States from a Confederation into a Federation.

Mr. Vredeling, who was speaking on the occasion of the four hundredth anniversary of the Union of Utrecht - the first step towards the creation of the Netherlands as we know it - began with some general historical references and then went on to highlight points of similarity between the situation of the American Confederation and Europe in the seventies, singling out "the problem of speaking to the world with one voice, the monetary chaos, the persistent deadlock caused by retention of the right of veto, the inability to agree on defence". Like the 'founding fathers' at the Philadelphia Convention in May 1787 "Europeans will have to make a qualitative leap forward, that is to say, from confederation to federation. Direct elections to the European Parliament can speed up this process". Its opponents were afraid that "Europe" would conflict with the objectives of a "liveable" existence and healthy democratic government. They were afraid that supra-nationality would clash with the need for sound decision-making at regional level. The selfsame arguments had raged over the Union of Utrecht, Mr. Vredeling said; "Plus que ça change, plus que ça reste la même chose". Such arguments had their value but were far from convincing, as Mr Vredeling proceeded to show from the history of the unification of the Netherlands. The mistrust of central authority was deeply ingrained in the old republic of the United Provinces. "The States-General could not take a decision without a unanimous vote; the right of veto was a trump card. In theory no town or region could be outvoted. It all sounded very democratic, but was in fact very theoretical. In the absence of a joint decision, Amsterdam, simply went its own way and gained more from the weakness of the institutions than the other members of the States-General, which thought they had to protect their interests through 'particularism'".

As things turned out, Mr. Vredeling went on to say, the creation of a central authority did not harm the interests of the regions. On the contrary, it gave regional authorities more scope. Without this centralization, the necessary decentralization based on Thorbecke's provincial and municipal legislation would never have come about. Before that the southern provinces had been no more than generality lands and Catholics no more than second-class citizens.

"The American example can serve as an inspiration too. The monument to the 'Unknown Warrior of the American Revolution in Philadelphia bears the inscription: "Freedom is a light for which many have died in darkness'". Particularism was born with the Americans. Yet they took the leap towards federation, bowing to the argument that if they didn't opt for a strong central government now, they would have a dictator within twenty years."

Mr. Vredeling hoped that people would become more aware of the historical significance of the European elections as polling day drew near. He had seized the opportunity offered by the Union of Utrecht commemoration to draw attention to their importance yet again.