

COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

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COMMISSION INFORMATION PROGRAMME
IN PREPARATION FOR DIRECT ELECTIONS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

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Introduction: The Role of the Commission

In the light of the forthcoming direct election to the European Parliament the Community's institutions and political parties must make a concerted effort to make the people of Europe more aware of what is involved in the European venture by focusing attention on the Community's successes and difficulties, its origins and its future. The Commission has a major role to play here and to this end must make the best possible use of its information programme and the additional funds which have been allocated for this purpose.

The Commission feels that, if the 180 million or so voters are to take an informed decision on polling day, they must know how the Community operates, what issues are to be resolved at European level and why, and what proposals have been made to this end. The Commission therefore has two specific aims in mind: firstly, to ensure that each and every voter is aware of the way Community decisions affect his life and the way he can help shape these decisions by voting; secondly, to make certain that the Commission for its part is aware of the attitudes and aspirations of the electorate.

Obviously the 273 press, radio and television journalists currently accredited to the Commission are the primary channels via which information about the Community flows on a day to day basis. Although they represent the world's media, a high proportion of their work is via the media of the nine member states of the Community. While respecting the complete freedom of expression of this press corps, this is where priority must be given in terms of the information programme.

It is true that the electorate as a whole favours direct elections. Successive Euro-Barometers have shown that by late 1976 69% were in favour of the elections as compared with 61% in late 1973 (though these averages hide the fact that the situation in a number of countries is rather difficult).

But interest in European affairs is still largely passive: Euro-Barometers have revealed that in the Community as a whole only 22% of interviewees claimed to be "very interested" in Community problems, and only about 11% discussed them "often".

The public as a whole does not see "Europe" as a vital force for solving the practical day-to-day problems facing the man in the street. The successes of the sixties tend to be forgotten: the public sees inflation, unemployment and energy problems, and it doubts whether the Community can play a major part in tackling them.

Of course the way the Community responds to such problems is vital for it and for each member state, and against this sceptical background direct elections stand out as a major event in the history of our Community. For the first time ever all the people of the Community will be asked not only to demonstrate their willingness to press ahead but also to pronounce on the Community's objectives. For this reason direct elections are a genuine "first". The

occasional referendums which have been held within the Community were something quite different. In 1978 the voter will have to select the individuals or political parties he wants to see representing the people of Europe in the European Parliament.

Introduction of the democratic process at Community level will call for a major effort on the part of all the political parties, the Member States and the Community's institutions. The task - making 180 million voters more aware of Community issues - is immense. It is essential that all concerned join forces if we are to ensure that as many people as possible vote in the first direct elections. The main objectives of the Commission's programme must be defined here and now.

The Commission's programme will be implemented in association with the European Parliament's information services to ensure a greater degree of coordination and hence efficiency in the campaigns launched by both institutions. Regular contacts have already been established between the two institutions and between their respective Information Offices.

The Commission must obviously continue to play its proper political role. But its information programme must be factual, providing objective information on, for instance, the working of Community institutions, the common policies, proposals put forward by the Commission, the debates sparked off by these proposals, the decisions finally taken, and so on.

It will then be for the political parties, in the context of their own campaigns, to assess this information in political terms.

The Resources available

One point is clear: the present programme covers this year only and is therefore no more than a "lead in" to 1978.

Bearing in mind the relatively limited means at our disposal we will direct our efforts in 1977, almost exclusively, to 'opinion makers'. By contrast in 1978 the aim should be to achieve more direct contact with as many voters as possible. Of course, if this is to be achieved, available funds will have to be increased since the information programme will have to be geared, both in scope and timing to the differing political and economic situations prevailing in the nine member states. The costs for this will be far higher than would be the case if identical programmes could be conducted in all nine countries.

In fact apart from its normal information programme the funds available to the Commission to try and present the facts to 180 million voters only amount to one million units of account at 0.00555 per voter.

Within this limit it is impossible to call on public relations firms to mount large-scale information campaigns, although the Commission's information services will continue to make occasional use of specialized firms for certain specific projects.

Similarly, any individual project aimed at reaching voters directly is out of the question (for instance, an all-out Community-wide poster campaign would cost something in the region of 5 million u.a.).

For this reason and if an effort in this direction is to be made the Commission must consider diverting a proportion of its resources under the "normal" information programme to supplement the special budget.

The Information Programme

The Commission's information effort will therefore fall under two separate headings, namely its "normal" information programme for 1977 and the special election programme.

"Normal" information programme for 1977

- (a) Throughout 1977 the "theme" of direct elections, calculated to involve Europeans in the construction of Europe, will be given a priority in all information activities launched under the Commission's "normal" information programme, which was forwarded to Parliament in December 1976 .

At a rough estimate - it is impossible to be more precise at this stage - 65% of the Commission's information effort in the Nine under the "normal" programme in 1977 will deal in some way with the direct elections theme - through the publication of articles in Commission periodicals, the organisation of lectures during information visits, the distribution of written or audio-visual material on Community policies, the designing of special displays for exhibitions, and so on.

- (b) The theme of direct elections, and the profound significance of the event itself, will become the key feature of the 1977 programme as time goes on. This will call for the preparation of specific written, sound or audio-visual material, increased use of the Commission's radio and television studios, the mounting of special exhibitions to tour certain countries, utilization of special venues, such as shows, fairs and exhibitions which attract large audiences for setting up Community stands, poster campaigns etc.

Special election programme: Information directed at "opinion makers"

The Commission will also implement a special information programme to be financed from the special budget earmarked for preparations for direct elections (1 million u.a.).

The media

It is clear that there is obviously no question of reaching 180 million voters without the help of the mass media, whether it be the press, radio or television.

We have already drawn attention to the particular role played by journalists accredited to the Commission. In addition the Commission intends via its Information offices to supply fact sheets on Community policies relevant to direct elections, to journalists of national and regional newspapers. Sectorial newspapers e.g. of trade unions will also constitute an important target. The Commission will also organise a special programme of visits to Brussels.

The Commission intends to enhance its contacts with national radio and television networks. Its efforts in this direction have already borne fruit in the form of much more extensive coverage of Community affairs. Close links have been established with national networks and with the European Broadcasting Union (EBU).

The Commission's new colour TV studio will soon be linked to Eurovision to allow extensive, up-to-the-minute broadcasting of Community news. National networks will also have access to other technical facilities and a series of working meetings will be organized in Brussels to promote cooperation between networks. The Commission will also offer organizations willing to help with the publicity campaign facilities for producing slide programmes, video-cassette programmes and other audio-visual material.

External Organizations

In a different way, senior staff working for organizations particularly involved in the "public" aspects of national life are "opinion makers" too.

- (a) There are many organisations of this type including political associations, trade unions, university associations, women's groups, farmers' associations, youth movements, teachers' associations, environmental protection and consumer information groups and so on. The Commission is planning to organize a special series of briefings on European affairs for the leaders of the different political, social or cultural associations throughout the Community. Once briefed participants will be in a position to lead group discussions on Europe within their own organizations.

These briefings will be organized by the Commission, again in close collaboration with the European Parliament's information services, at regional, national or Community level. It is hoped that approximately 3 000 people will be reached in this way.

Regional or national briefings will last for one or two days and will, for practical reasons, be confined to groups of not more than forty. Programmes will be built around the special interests of each group, but will invariably include a series of talks on the scope and significance of direct elections and on the aims and achievements of the Community.

A limited number of in-depth briefings will also be organized in Brussels. These will be geared to key groups; it is felt that these should be brought into direct contact with the Commission. The briefings will last for not more than two days and will involve twenty people a time.

- (b) The external speakers used by the Commission to address public meetings organized at regional or local level form another category of "opinion maker".

Information material and documentation

The Commission is in the process of preparing information material and documentation to back up and facilitate the work of "opinion makers" and to meet the large number of requests for information which will be received (witness the referendum campaign in the United Kingdom).

- (a) Publications will include:

- (i) additional runs of the "basic booklets" (dealing with the

historical background, the main areas of Community activity, and the working of its institutions); these are aimed at a public with some knowledge of European affairs;

- (ii) a general brochure (a first run of 400 000 copies) and even simpler leaflets (a run of approximately one million copies); both of these publications will be produced by the Community's Information Offices so that they can be tailored to local audiences; they will however be built around a "common core";
 - (iii) specialized brochures to cater for specific national needs;
 - (iv) information kits for organizers, mainly intended for participants in the seminar programme.
- (b) Audio-visual material, most of which will be prepared by headquarters information services. This material will be designed for use at seminars organized for "opinion makers" and, more generally, at lectures, talks or meetings of all kinds organized as part of the campaigns which will develop as the elections draw near.

Arrangements have already been made for four sets of slides with commentaries (the history of the European Community; the European Parliament and its role; Community policies; European elections and the young) and two 15-minute films (drawing in the main on archive material, the other highlighting the importance of the first European elections).

Subsidies for programmes mounted by outside agencies

The Commission will be prepared to assist information programmes mounted by movements particularly interested in the European venture and activities which could be promoted with the help of the universities, notably European Institutes or Study Centres or associations of these bodies.

The Commission's present intention is to set roughly one third of the special budget (approximately 300 000 u.a.) aside for this purpose.

These organisations are in a position to distribute information efficiently and many of them have been receiving Commission support for a number of years. The Commission has been able to assess their impact on public opinion. A Commission subsidy, combined with the other sources of finance available to these organisations, will allow them to reach a wider, sometimes a considerably wider, audience.

As far as the universities are concerned, the Commission has been made aware of the value of their analysis and research work on many occasions. It knows that the impact of these activities can be considerably greater in areas where European Institutes or Study Centres are located.

Strict criteria will be applied to select the programmes which will receive financial backing: presentation of detailed programmes, political balance, impact on public opinion, multiplying effect, proportion of the cost being met by the movement or organisation presenting the project.

The Commission will monitor implementation of the programmes subsidised to ensure that they do in fact deal with the European elections.

Of course the programme outlined above will have to be adapted or indeed given new direction to meet changing requirements in the period between now and polling day. That programme will need to be flexible enough to respond to relevant headline news; we may have to change our approach in the light of public reaction and we will have to take account of the findings of the survey of public attitudes to direct elections to be organised by the Commission at Parliament's request.