

## Europe's parliament in the doldrums

**This week's re-election of the European Parliament will have been a futile exercise unless the newly elected can find a role for themselves; the best bet will be to engineer the intergovernmental conference planned for 1996.**

THIS week's elections of members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are at once a reminder that the European Union (EU) is a reality and that the reality falls a long way short of the ideal. Between today (9 June) and next Sunday (12 June), all 12 member states are required to re-elect members to the Strasbourg parliament (which is sometimes to be found in Brussels and sometimes, for some of its functions, in Luxembourg). The representation afforded by these arrangements is far from equal. Small countries have more than a fair share of MEPs, for example. The representation is also variable in character. European law allows national governments to organize European elections as they see fit. Some have settled for proportional representation, others for constituency elections in which the winning party's candidate is elected. There is a general complaint throughout Europe that MEPs, divorced as they are from national politics, cannot represent their notional constituents in any meaningful way. MEPs themselves complain that they have too little influence on EU affairs.

Yet the European Parliament is supposed to be a crucial institution of the EU. How can its reputation, among those who belong to it as well as those who vote for it, be so low? The simple truth is that it has hitherto been kept deliberately in that condition by most member governments, who have their say on EU affairs through the European Council, and would not relish a system in which their decisions were qualified by a parliament in some far-off European city. Of course, the Maastricht Treaty, now in force, gives the parliament more power to scrutinize and to comment on draft European legislation; will that give frustrated MEPs a greater sense of usefulness? It seems improbable — the parliament has too little coherence around common principles and goals to be both an effective and a constructive critic of legislation. That could change, but only with time.

So why is the whole of Europe spending all this time and energy electing MEPs? The explanation is to be found in the words "ever closer union" found in the preamble to the Maastricht Treaty. Europe's parliament is a parliament waiting for a state of affairs that has not yet arrived. The question of how it should occupy itself in the interval is then more readily answered. In its own long-term interests, it should make the cause of European union more coherent and persuasive. The battle over Maastricht and its ratification was so long and bruising for so many member governments precisely because the European Communities (as the EU then was) had no effective way of explaining centrally what

Maastricht was about. (National governments were eager to put their own gloss on it, the European Commission was inevitably constrained by the fear that pronouncements from Brussels would be denounced as internal political interference by member states.)

But how can the parliament advance the cause of "ever closer union" when many of those standing for election this week are opposed to the idea? Admirably, at least in one important respect. In retrospect, one of the serious errors at Maastricht was that governments put their names to a treaty sewn together by their own officials with such contrived intricacy that politicians could not easily pick it apart. The result is that many of its proposals were detached from political and even institutional reality. (The project for European Monetary Union, one of the centrepieces of Maastricht, had come unstuck within nine months of ratification.) It would have been particularly valuable if sceptical members of the European Parliament had some say long before the treaty came up for signature.

That is the cue to which the newly elected parliament should jump. Member states (which may then be 16-strong) are committed to another intergovernmental conference in 1996, when the agenda will explore new forms of political cooperation. Already several contentious issues have identified themselves, from immigration policy to the question of what might have been done about Bosnia and Herzegovina. On past form, officials will already be beavering away at the design of compromises for 1996. The new parliament should seek to force its way into that process. Sceptical opinions of what is proposed would be especially valuable, if only as warnings of trouble ahead. But how would that advance the European cause? It is more important that the product of the next intergovernmental conference should be a practical and easily acceptable treaty than that it should be an ambitious one. The European Parliament may lack some aspects of legitimacy, but it has enough to ensure that. □

## Is North Korea nuclear?

**The rest of the world cannot let North Korea go nuclear, but needs guile to prevent it.**

WITH Iraq now quiet, North Korea is the most troublesome signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It seems generally agreed that North Korea declined to allow