

**28 03 2008 - Speech on the occasion of the opening of Parliament's
historical archives**

Madam President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would first of all like to thank the Paris information office for kindly hosting this event, which I consider important and we are fortunate indeed and honoured to be able to be able to discuss the opening of the Parliament's archives in the presence of Simone Veil, the first president of the directly elected European Parliament.

1. Parliament's takes the lead in declassifying historical archives

As Vice President responsible for transparency and access to documents, I was personally involved, together with our Secretary-General and a specially appointed committee, in the procedure for declassifying documents more than 30 years old found in the historical archives of the European Parliament. I am glad to be able to say that, although this 30-year period is provided for in Community legislation applicable to all institutions, the Parliament has taken the lead in making transparency a reality.

What are we talking about exactly? The collection which could, with Mrs Veil's agreement, be called the "Simone Veil collection", contains all documents archived at the end of Mrs Veil's presidency. It contains

documents drawn up or received during Mrs. Veil's presidency from 1979 to 1982, and those from preceding presidencies.

This amounts to more than twenty thousand documents, some of great historical value, a very large majority of which¹ will be progressively declassified from 2009 onwards and made available at the Parliament's premises in Luxembourg. The remaining documents, for example those relating to staff matters, legal procedures or pension rights of specific officials will be available on request through the usual procedures in Parliament's register.²

I would like to present to you today a selection of these documents which is now available online at the following address: XXX. The selection offers a unique insight into the activities and priorities of a young parliament at a particularly crucial moment in its evolution. As I hope to demonstrate, these years have shaped the way the institution has functioned and developed up until to today.

2. The Veil Collection

- a) A Parliament keen on increasing its powers and pushing the boundaries of the Community

The young European Parliament was particularly keen on extending its powers, and this can be seen for example in President Veil's request to Colette Flesch (then President of the Council) that Parliament be formally consulted on the fifth European Development Fund, and the dispute over

¹ 85-87%

² Using Regulation 1049/2001. I.e. you will decide on them if there is a confirmatory application.

the budget in 1980. This was a political dialogue between what I consider to be two outstanding liberal ladies.

In her autobiography, Mrs Veil recalls the pleasant character of her first year in office as President of the European Parliament, with the exception of this budgetary dispute. Indeed she even recalls the intense pressure which the French government exerted over her (and thus the Parliament) for what were in fact relatively modest sums. A French representative apparently qualified Mrs. Veil's position as "treason" and contrary to her national duty. This episode is very revealing of how far we have come today, even though there is still a long way to go vis a vis Council and Member States.

In a speech to the Juan March foundation in 1982, on which her written corrections are apparent (and perhaps to be slightly provocative, of equal historical value to the original text!) she explains that budgetary discussions are an occasion to "judge policies" and not "mere accounting exercises".³ At that time Parliament's powers were very limited outside the budgetary field, and it seems perfectly understandable that Parliament should have used its powers over non-compulsory expenditure to push for a more generous policy towards Africa.

Perhaps Mrs. Veil will enlighten us on that particular conundrum and on the historical failure to adopt the 1980 budget.

From mere consultation to full codecision, every increase in the Parliament's interinstitutional standing was hard-fought. Over the years, Parliament emerged as a major actor in the Community budgetary and

legislative process. We continue to struggle with such issues today, as the Treaties exclude major issues, particularly the area of freedom, security and justice from proper Parliamentary and indeed judicial scrutiny. With the Treaty of Lisbon, Parliament would become a proper co-legislator with Council. Parliament is in the middle of preparations for the entry into force of this Treaty, and I am personally involved in this process through Parliament's working party on reform. The fact that I am going to the US Congress with this working party on an official visit to learn lessons from there, about everything from setting plenary agendas to the working of interparliamentary delegations, is in itself revealing of how far we in the European Parliament have travelled.

In the same 1982 speech, Simone Veil insisted on the dangers of an incorrect application of Community law at national level ("les infractions repetees et volontaires aux regles communautaires des lors que leur respect porterait atteinte a des interets nationaux, meme tout a fait sectoriels". De telle pratiques compromettent "les regles d'unite du marche a l'interieur de la CEE"), and the negative impact this could have on public opinion throughout Europe. This is a theme which particularly occupies the current Parliament, as exemplified by its influential annual reports on the "application of Community law" and the Committee of Inquiry whose report I was responsible for writing. Application of Community law by judicial authorities, and judicial training, is also particularly important aspect, perhaps neglected by all institutions in the past, and which we are now working on closely.

- b) A Parliament whose work involves very direct and personal contact with citizens within and outside of the EU

³ Note: this part of the speech was in fact deleted by President Veil.

Following the introduction of direct universal suffrage, it is self-evident that Members of the European Parliament have close links with their constituents. Indeed, most Members now need one or more assistants only to help them with such correspondence. I would like, however, to draw your attention to a series of letters dating back to 1980 in which an Argentinian mother asked for President Veil's support in finding her daughter who had been arrested in the street four years early. The tragic plight of this mother and daughter, and the consistent efforts of Mrs. Veil to convince the Argentinian President to look into various such 'disappearances' transpire very vividly from the letters exchanged. Indeed, the mother was anxious to ensure that any envelope used for a response concealed the fact that she had contacted the European Parliament on such a matter!

c) A Parliament which pioneered gender equality

As President Veil stated in a 1981 speech to the Woman's political association, the move to universal suffrage in the European Parliament brought with it a greater presence of women within the chamber (from less than 10% initially, to more than 30% currently). An ad-hoc committee on women's rights was set up, which then developed into the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. Importantly, from the mid-seventies, the Parliament was involved in the adoption a large amount of legislation in the social field which directly affected women, such as the Equal Treatment Directive, the Self-Employment Directive or the Parental Leave Directive.

I am also happy to say that the situation has changed somewhat since 1981 when Simone Veil described gender balance within Parliament's secretariat as "far from ideal". We now have 3 women Directors-General and 6 Directors. The proportion of women in these top posts has more than doubled in ten years. It has tripled since the time of the Veil Presidency. There is however still much to do both inside the Parliament, and in terms of legislation for the European Union, and the seminar this morning highlighted this vividly.

d) A Parliament concerned with the promotion of human rights

In its criticism of the most blatant human rights violations in the world over the years, starting from the period which concerns us today, the European Parliament used its moral authority to highlight to the outside world the importance which European citizens attach to safeguarding fundamental rights as a basis for democratic societies.

Let me take a symbolic example: the arrest of Andrei Sakharov in 1980. Reflecting the robust position taken by Parliament's political committee, President Veil sent a telegram to several Soviet ambassadors expressing indignation at the level of repression in the USSR and solidarity with the ardent human rights defender and Nobel peace prize laureate.

Mr Sakharov's name is now born by an annual prize which Parliament awards to a person having defended freedom of expression. Parliament's Bureau also recently decided on an exceptional measure granting financial supporting to the Sakharov Foundation in Moscow, thus further highlighting the symbolic importance of freedom of expression and human rights in the current global context.

I would like to draw your attention to another revealing piece of correspondence. In January 1980, Christopher Dodd, a Member of the US Congress urged President Veil to support a joint resolution urging respective governments to withdraw their teams from the 1980 Moscow Olympics because of the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. The resolution was not adopted, as this was not the practice of such joint meetings. However, the issue resurfaces again today with the current events in Tibet and Darfur and the Olympic games in Beijing this summer.

3. Conclusion

I started with a female tandem (Veil-Flesh, both from the liberal family) and will finish with another one. Last but not least, I would like to highlight the correspondence dating back to 1981 which resulted in the first ever address to Parliament of a Council President giving an account of the results of a European Council summit.

It was none other than Margaret Thatcher who, at the time, expressed a strong commitment to “the development of the Community” and for “the institutions to work harmoniously together”. It is perhaps no coincidence then that Parliament’s new information office in London will be the former conservative party headquarters.

I hope that it is clear that the many battles fought during those seminal years continue to shape Parliament’s agenda and institutional personality. Finally, I hope that the opening of the archives from that period will be suitably publicised and yield as much valuable historical information as

possible, and perhaps, constitute a fitting early chapter in the history of the European Parliament.

Of course, I very much look forward to what Mrs Simone Veil will have to say on all this!

Thank you for your attention.