

'The organisation of political parties on a European scale: still problems to be resolved' from 30 jours d'Europe (October 1978)

Caption: In the run-up to elections to the European Parliament in 1979, the political parties of the Nine get organised on a European scale.

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Preparing for the European Parliament elections

Organisation of the political parties on a European scale: still problems to be resolved

The success of the 1979 European elections will depend on the turnout. It is up to the political parties in our countries to mobilise their voters. Since the election is European and not national, it seems logical for the parties to organise themselves at European level. But it is no easy task to establish joint platforms, as Rudolf Hrbek, Professor of Political Science at the University of Tübingen, explains.

The political parties of the Nine have already been trying to organise themselves on a European scale for several years. The present Members of the European Parliament have formed groups in accordance with political affiliation rather than national origin. Three large European federations already accommodate the three main tendencies, Liberal, Christian Democrat and Socialist, at Community level.

This is a definite step towards European integration, but let us not be under any illusions. These European federations are still a long way from having the same well-established role as national parties in day-to-day political life. Major obstacles have to be overcome before we have European political parties comparable to our national political parties.

Leaders of the main political parties in the Community countries have long been aware that cooperation with their European counterparts needs to be closer than in the traditional 'Internationals'. Some years ago, therefore, the leaders of the three main groups, the Christian Democrats, Liberals and Socialists, set up unions of the Community Member States' parties in their respective international associations. The unions were later developed into the *Confederation of Socialist Parties of the European Community* (April 1974), the *Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties in the European Community* (March 1976) and the *European People's Party, Federation of Christian-Democratic Parties* (April 1976), respectively.

Not only are the three federations closely connected with the corresponding political groups in the European Parliament, the groups also played an important part in their creation.

The prospect of direct elections to the European Parliament also lent momentum to the creation of the federations. The parties did not think it helped the European cause to offer themselves to the voters as purely national parties and to campaign with national slogans that were too familiar.

The first task they set themselves, therefore, was to draw up a joint manifesto, or at least a joint electoral platform, that all the parties in a federation could support. The proceedings at and the outcome of the manifesto debates made the difficulties facing the federations very clear.

Liberals and Christian Democrats in agreement

The first problem was the timetable. The parties were unable to meet the deadlines which they had set themselves.

The Liberals were the most successful. At their inaugural congress in Stuttgart in late March 1976, they set up seven working parties. By the following November, the documents drawn up by the working parties had been discussed and the substance thereof approved. Three more working parties were then set up, as well as a central manifesto committee which submitted a general draft in March 1977. This was approved by the federation's executive committee and forwarded to the 13 member parties which considered it and proposed any changes they thought were needed. The Liberals were the first federation to hold a manifesto congress (18 to 20 November 1977, in Brussels), after which they adopted unopposed, with a few abstentions, the general principles of the Federation of European Liberal Democrats (ELD) election manifesto. The Liberals will be entering the European election campaign under the title ELD, with a yellow and blue logo.

Immediately after its creation, the European People's Party (EPP), composed of the Christian-Democratic parties, also set up a manifesto committee, which submitted its draft to the member parties for discussion in May 1977. Since the draft had been amended several times, the manifesto congress was held in Brussels on

6 and 7 March 1978, instead of on 1 and 2 December 1977, as originally intended. The EPP's political manifesto was adopted at the congress by a very large majority. Amendments proposed at the congress itself were not incorporated in the final text of the manifesto; instead, the congress forwarded them to the political bureau as 'resolutions'. This ploy made it possible to put the manifesto to the vote, and one wonders what would have happened if, for example, a lengthy debate had started on the proposal seeking to define other types of social unit besides the family as foundations of society.

Problems for the Socialists

The Liberals and Christian Democrats now have their election platforms. The Socialist manifesto debate, on the other hand, has ground to a halt, even though they started earlier than the others. They had already adopted the basic principles of a manifesto in the summer of 1975, and this was considered further by four working parties between January 1976 and June 1977. The draft which they produced was forwarded to the member parties and published. It then sank without trace.

What went wrong? The parties concerned did not discuss the working parties' draft, or at least did not discuss it fully enough. For instance, the French Socialists announced in the autumn of 1977 that they did not expect to start discussions before the national elections in March 1978. That was understandable: the draft was a compromise and would have entailed tensions within the party and laid the Socialists open to attack from the Communists, who would inevitably have claimed that the fundamental elements of the draft were incompatible with the joint manifesto of the French Left. Outside France, the draft was criticised for being too broad and not very suitable as an election manifesto.

The Socialists therefore needed a new election manifesto, one which would have to be adopted at the congress scheduled to take place early in 1979.

Only the ELD and the EPP therefore have European platforms at the moment.

Ambiguous and contradictory statements

It is obvious from the substance of the manifestos or draft manifestos that their establishment was not an easy process. In many areas, the parties managed to reach a compromise only with great difficulty. One example is economic policy. According to their manifesto, the Liberals have confidence both in the dynamics of private enterprise and in the democratic management of the economy by means of a flexible plan drawn up in cooperation with both sides of industry and taking account of certain wage and price guidelines.

Not all these principles are acceptable to all our countries and all our parties. The EPP manifesto is equally vague about how far the State can and must go in laying down economic and social policy guidelines.

It is in the Socialist draft in particular that the compromises are most evident. In their manifesto for a fairer distribution of income and wealth, they advocate both a fiscal policy discriminating against the rich and wealth creation for the poorer people in society through the promotion of savings. These recommendations reflect the differences in ideas and strategies from one country to another. The same applies to the statements on economic democracy. Four models are proposed simultaneously, ranging from worker representation on supervisory bodies to workers' self-management and including participation on an equal basis.

The manifestos include statements which are not just ambiguous but actually contradictory. What is one supposed to make, for instance, of the ELD's view that the common agricultural policy has to provide benefits for both farmers and consumers, without imposing an unnecessary burden on European taxpayers? The EPP's statements on participation, for instance as regards balanced representation, are just as specific.

The issues which the manifestos fail to address are no less revealing. The Socialists, for instance, say nothing about nuclear energy.

A typical example of the situation in the Confederation of Socialist Parties is the emphasis in the Socialists' draft manifesto on the national route to democratic Socialism. They stress that the transfer of new powers to the European institutions must not be an obstacle to the implementation of a Socialist programme at national level. This betrays an anxiety that the Community will constitute an obstacle on the road to Socialism.

Is a joint election campaign possible?

It is easy to foresee that the use of these manifestos will create problems that will surface as soon as the election slogans are formulated, since the slogans will inevitably be suggested by the national parties. The varying interpretations of the joint election platforms that this is bound to produce might well draw attention to existing differences and endanger the cohesion of the federations. It is also debatable whether the manifestos can, in fact, be used jointly in the election campaign.

Will a joint election campaign be possible at all? Will the political leaders of the various parties in a European federation really work together — Schmidt with Mitterrand, Strauss with Tindemans? Will the parties not be afraid that, by pursuing this course, they might alienate the voters and expose themselves to attack from their opponents in their own countries? To take this a stage further: can two parties in the same country, which are in competition nationally but belong to the same European federation (such as the Liberals and the Republicans in Italy) support the same manifesto in the European election campaign? And what will happen if they do not?

The three European political federations will also have to expect difficulties of another kind. The European political spectrum is far from stable. First of all, there are shifts in the composition of national parties. In France, for instance, the UDF encompasses the centre parties represented by the Government which have joined different European federations and support the manifesto of 'their' federation. The CDS, for example, is a member of the EPP, whereas the Independent Republicans have joined the ELD. National coalitions like this will inevitably have an impact on Europe in the long run, and, since national considerations will always take precedence, it will be the European federations that suffer. Suppose, for instance, that the CDU and the CSU did not campaign on the same side in the European elections, which could well happen under German electoral law. Is it likely that that division would not affect their cooperation in the EPP?

Disruptive factors

The cohesion of the federations could be undermined by another factor as well. The present national coalitions vary greatly from one Member State to another. In some countries, the Christian Democrats are allied with the Socialists, in others with the Liberals. In some countries, one of the parties in a federation belongs to the Government, in others to the Opposition. The different attitudes to which this would give rise in either case could cause problems in the European federations.

The issue of a coalition with the Communists might be particularly embarrassing from that point of view. The argument put forward by the parties 'concerned', whereby the European Parliament does not have to worry about forming a government and so the question of coalitions or pacts with the Communists is irrelevant, ignores the real problem facing not only the Socialists but also (in Italy) the Christian Democrats. Would it be credible in the long run to cooperate nationally with the Communists (for instance on the economy), whilst at the same time stating that this strategy is not applicable at Community level for the same problems?

The changes and developments in the national composition of parties are another factor that might cause problems for the federations. On 24 April this year, the European Democratic Union (EDU) was set up in Salzburg. This is a working party of Christian-Democratic, Conservative and other moderate centre parties, including in particular the Gaullists and the British and Danish Conservatives. However, the Belgian, Dutch and Italian Christian-Democratic parties have not joined, refusing to ally themselves with the other parties, which they regard as too conservative. Since one of the declared aims of the EDU is to pave the way for alliances in the European Parliament, it looks as though it might cause serious problems in the Christian-

Democratic Group and the EPP.

It should also be pointed out that bilateral action by, for example, the CSU and the Gaullists might have repercussions and that the EDU, whose aim is to prevent a shift towards Socialism and Communism in Western Europe, is likely to prove attractive to many parties.

It should also be borne in mind that the European political spectrum will to some extent be altered by small regionalist or separatist groups, new parties and 'movements' (such as the environmentalists) and by the parties of the three applicant countries (Greece, Portugal and Spain). As long as that is the case, the three European federations will be subject to further 'adjustments'.

Finally, the question of funding is a factor that could cause problems within the federations. What arrangements are going to be made to secure the necessary funds? What allocation scheme will be used?

It is therefore clear that, although the mere existence of European federations of political parties must be regarded as a step towards integration, it would be unwise to be too euphoric.

Rudolf Hrbek