

Is Labour's EU legacy fuelling Brexit

NEW LABOUR IN EUROPE: LEADERSHIP AND LOST OPPORTUNITIES

by Anita Pollack

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£17.50



Anita Pollack, Labour MEP for a decade up to 1999, has followed up her earlier *Wreckers or Builders? A History of Labour MEPs 1979-99* in a new book covering Labour in Government. Her story is of not of one, but rather a series of lost opportunities over 13 unlucky years. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown failed to put Britain at the heart of Europe. For Blair it was not a matter of wish but will, as he allowed himself to be diverted and distracted by events and blandishments. In contrast, Brown, who at worst was a mild eurosceptic and at best an inchoate pro-European, was incapable of understanding that Europe was an integral part of domestic politics rather than some intergovernmental distraction you occasionally gave a nod to when absolutely necessary. It wasn't new; in opposition, prior to 1997's Labour victory, he managed to produce an economic policy paper for the 'shadow' cabinet that failed to mention Europe once. Labour's 18 years of political exile – and its years of internal wrestling with its own euro-sceptics – meant it was ill-prepared to operate in the new European political architecture. The European Parliament was either an ante-chamber for Westminster for those on the way up or a convalescent home for those on the way down rather than a secondfront to deliver Labour's promises. Pollack skilfully and exhaustively outlines the sterling work of MEPs like Stephen Hughes on Social Policy, Alan Donnelly on German Unification, Glenys Kinnock on Development and David Martin on Trade, but back home in the Party and Government this went unnoticed or ignored. MEPs were Labour's shock troops rarely seen as the vanguard for the onward march of Labour in Europe but rather a sacrificial rearguard to stubbornly resist foreign

socialists favouring of protection over production. Some – and occasionally a majority – went native. It was Labour MEPs that first exposed Echelon and the NSA's spying. Pollack amusingly reports that at times Labour Ministers were reduced to lobbying Britain's Liberal MEPs to counter their Labour counterparts commitments to the trade unions and the Working Time Directive.

The consequence was more isolation, with European Parliamentary Labour Party (EPLP) leaders reduced to 'meeting' Tony Blair between floors in No 10's lifts. Not that toadying served any better. The leader who described the Iraq invasion in a European Parliament debate as "a people has been liberated, freedom reigns where terror once did" deservedly failed to creep his way into the House of Lords. Equally Pollack details that within the EPLP even the most Christian MEPs could rarely resist kicking a man when he was down.

New Labour in Europe – because of its encyclopaedic detail – inevitably gets some things wrong. Socialist Commissioners' dinners with the Group's leaders were taking place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as was EPLP attendance at 'shadow' cabinet meetings, and were no product of the late 90s or 00s respectively.

Nevertheless, this is unquestionably a valuable first book on a neglected facet of both Labour and EU history. One only worries that Pollack is all too right and it was Labour's failures that were the fatal legacy that leads inexorably towards Brexit in June.

Glyn Ford

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