

On the comeback trail for the Euro elections?

After some lean years, there are grounds for cautious optimism in May for Ed Miliband and Labour, writes Anita Pollack

For the first time in 15 years, Labour hopes to return a substantial tranche of new MEPs in the important European Parliament elections in May. Predictions are that there could be as many as 28 Labour MEPs compared to the current 13, with Labour vying with UKIP for the party with the largest number of MEPs. With five MEPs retiring, this could mean more new faces than at any time since 1994. The selections for candidates were not without drama, with numerous complaints that good candidates had been ignored in more than one region in a process overdue for reform. But that is now water under the bridge and we must look to the future which is bound to be better than in recent times. What is clear is that active trade unionists will form a substantial part of the European Parliamentary Labour Party and a number of the New Labourites are retiring.

This time the party with the most votes in the European elections may see its candidate become President of the European Commission. Polls are showing the socialists and Christian Democrats pretty much neck and neck with a slight lead for the centre-left. Recently, the Party of European Socialists (PES) elected the current European Parliament President, German SPD member Martin Schultz, to be its flag-bearer. Yet it has now emerged that at the PES manifesto meeting in Rome in March, Labour abstained from endorsing Schultz, although it did support the joint manifesto. Reasons so far floated appear to be that Schultz is too federalist and supported an increase in the European budget while Labour sought a freeze.

The Christian Democrats have selected an unashamed federalist, the long-serving former Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Jean-Claude Juncker. The European Liberals have gone for their old favourite, a former Prime Minister of Belgium and also a strong federalist, Guy Verhofstadt.

So, one might ask, who would Labour support? Perhaps with the luxury of not being in government when the horse-trading takes place, Labour may not need to support anyone at all. Our lack of support for Schultz may cause difficulties with socialist

colleagues in the future. European Voice (an offshoot of the Economist) recently suggested that the British Labour Party may quit the PES over its opposition to Schultz, but this has been strenuously denied by Labour.

So how has Labour dealt with the European Union in recent times? The Tony Blair years, which began with a declaration that the New Labour Government wanted to put Britain at the heart of Europe, soon ran into the sand. At first there was great excitement across the water at the election of a Labour administration and the end of long years of Conservative obstruction in Europe. Originally keen to join the euro, Labour's plans foundered on Gordon Brown's unmet "five economic tests". Since the financial crisis, membership of the single currency no longer appears to be on the agenda.

This was followed by the bitter selection process for Labour candidates to fit the new closed regional list system of voting for the European Parliament that was introduced for the 1999 elections. In that team, there were six new faces, two of them minority ethnic, but Labour's overall presence went down from 62 to 29. And for the first time ever, the Socialist Group was not the largest group in the Parliament.

Blair found that the pressure of keeping on side the British Eurosceptic press and the need to maintain caution so as to ensure a second term in office for Labour led to other matters taking precedence. He had few pro-Europeans in his Cabinet and some high-profile sceptics. The likes of Peter Mandelson, Robin Cook, Charles Clarke and Alan Johnson were often drowned out by Jack Straw, David Blunkett, John Prescott and others. Gordon Brown, too, began to take a less than enthusiastic line on Europe than he had done in earlier years.

Then came the Iraq War. At the 2004 European elections, voters punished Blair, leaving Labour with a much-reduced team of only 19 and no new blood at all, for the first time since 1979. The right were still in the ascendancy in Europe. There were the first UKIP members, whose then leader, Robert Kilroy-Silk, declared they were in Brussels to wreck it. They were, and



The Labour Party leader's stance appears to be a wise one. Photo: Paris Jefferson

still are, poor attenders at committee meetings where the work is done, and even for voting, preferring the grandstand of making insulting remarks in plenary sessions.

The New Labour Government's historic third term victory in 2005 was quickly followed by another British presidency of the EU. Blair, knowing he was unpopular because of Iraq, pulled out all the stops and made an outstanding speech to the European Parliament at the outset of the presidency, gaining huge applause. He even brokered a deal on the vexed British rebate.

After the untimely death of Robin Cook, the European Parliamentary Labour Party also lost a popular veteran when Phillip Whitehead, a former MP, died over the Christmas break in 2005. He was replaced by trade unionist Glenis Willmott, who is now leader of the group.

The middle noughties were characterised by the "TB-GBs", as the war of succession was dubbed. New Labour's "reforms" became less and less informed by social democracy and more by neo-liberalism. The famous Third Way lost its sparkle with German and French leaders. When Brown became Prime Minister in 2007, he made little effort to win friends in Europe until during the sub-prime financial crisis. For a time, he was being lauded as "saving the world". The Labour Government, dogged by internal dissent, MPs' expenses

scandals and the prospect of a shrinking economy, was in trouble. Blair had made Mandelson a European Commissioner in charge of the trade portfolio in 2004. Brown brought Mandelson back to help save the Government at home in the autumn of 2008, and the latter was replaced in Europe by the then Labour Leader in the House of Lords, Baroness Catherine Ashton, who is currently in charge of the EU's foreign policy.

Europe was not the high point of policy towards the end of the decade, although Conservatives had been clamouring for a referendum on what started out as the European Constitutional Treaty and became a watered-down version, the Lisbon Treaty.

When the 2009 European elections came around, Labour returned its smallest-ever group of MEPs, at 13, level pegging with UKIP and there were two British National Party members elected. The one new face was from Wales where Labour's only star, Glenys Kinnock, had retired, along with the other Welsh MEP, Eluned Morgan. Both are now in the House of Lords, although strangely not the Labour MEP leader at the time, Gary Titley.

The Tories were rampant and under their new leader, David Cameron, withdrew their MEPs from the centre-right European People's Party. This tiny team of Labour MEPs has struggled heroically, working harder than ever to bring about some gains in European policy, particularly in terms of

consumer protection.

And the pendulum swings. Polling suggests Labour may do well in the forthcoming elections, but so will UKIP. If we do our bit in Britain, the Socialist Group may return to being the dominant party in the new European Parliament. Turnout is, therefore, essential. The current Labour MEPs can relate numerous instances where, had we more MEPs, votes would have been won instead of lost over the past five years.

Given that the European Parliament these days has equal decision making power with the Council of Ministers it really does matter which party sends the most MEPs to "Brussels". The time is long overdue for party members to wake up to this and make an effort.

Having said all that, Labour has now firmed-up its position on a European referendum. We are not in favour of an in-out referendum in 2017 along the lines suggested by Cameron. Ed Miliband remains under pressure from many in our own party who would like to see a referendum to "get this settled once and for all", which it won't achieve.

On March 12 in a major speech and an article in the *Financial Times*, the Labour leader firmed up the party's intention to work for reforms in the EU and to resist a referendum unless there are transfers of power from the United Kingdom to the EU. To commit a future Labour government to a divisive campaign on a Europe referendum in its first year or two does not seem to me to be a good idea and Ed's stance at this stage appears wise.

Anita Pollack was Labour MEP for South West London from 1989-99 and before that a political advisor to Barbara Castle. Her first book, Wreckers or Builders? A History of Labour MEPs 1979-99, is available from John Harper Publishing. ISBN 978-0-9556202-9-4. To avoid Amazon, go direct to the publisher: <http://www.johnharperpublishing.co.uk/pg01.shtml>. She is currently writing another book on New Labour in Europe covering the 1997-2010 period which hopefully will be published later in the year. Twitter @AnitaPollack. Website <http://www.anitapollack.eu>