

Divided they fall writes Anita Pollack

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The Conservatives' untenable position on Europe which has forced their MEPs into the arms of unsavoury Latvian and Polish extreme-right partners who include Holocaust and climate-change

deniers has earned criticism from the mainstream centre-right in European politics. Commentators, not only from the UK, suggest it will cause problems for them should Cameron's party win next year's general election.

Labour has also been between a rock and a hard place on Europe. Back in the 1970s, after Britain had joined what many then referred to as the "common market", there were sixteen empty seats in the (then delegated) European Parliamentary Assembly, due to the refusal of Labour to send Members to take up their share of the places. These were not filled until after the 1975 Referendum delivered a "yes" vote on Britain's continued membership of the EEC, though many in the Labour movement remained opposed to what was criticized as a "rich man's club".

When it came to the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979 immediately following the devastating election defeat to Mrs Thatcher's Conservatives, Labour contested only reluctantly, and on a policy of withdrawal. Conservatives, then pro-Europe, swept the floor. Labour's small group of seventeen MEPs, mostly anti-market, believed they would only be MEPs for one term. A future Labour government would withdraw, many believed. Some were still there twenty years later.

The 1980s was a decade of trouble and strife for Labour in Europe as well as at home. The 1984

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European election returned thirty-two Labour MEPs, up from seventeen, but the new Members were almost entirely "anti-market", largely selected at a time when Michael Foot was Leader. It meant our MEPs spent the next five years in internal battles over policy, with a new Leader every year at a time when Neil Kinnock was attempting to shift the Party to a more pragmatic and constructive position on Europe. After Barbara Castle was deposed leadership of the MEPs swung wildly from anti-market hard left to newly pro-market Fabian, to left-wing anti-market again. Our fellow comrades in the Socialist Group could only look on in despair. Votes in this divided Labour group of MEPs were often 16-16 and depended upon which way one or two Members would swing (one of those is now a Member of the Conservative Party, styling himself David Cameron's Envoy to the Trade Unions). Many fruitless hours in 1986 were spent arguing about more than a hundred amendments to a paper, purporting to be the policy position of Labour MEPs on Europe. After half a year of battling in bitter meetings it never saw the light of day.

The great and often petty animosities within the Labour Group can be illustrated when on one occasion right-wing pro-marketeer John Tomlinson (now Lord) had been injured in a car accident, the Left moved an amendment to the "get well" message to remove the word "soon"!

The pendulum began to swing in the 1980s as the European Community began delivering legislation on equality, employment and social projection and soon, too, environment, which was welcomed by the trades unions after Jacques Delors' famous speech to the TUC on the Social Chapter. It became a counter-balance to Thatcherite policies that were causing so much grief to working people at home. By this time the Conservatives were swinging the opposite way following Thatcher's famous Bruges speech in the autumn of 1988 about not letting in socialism by the back door.

The Conservatives' modern day association with neo-fascists is not new. When a British Conservative was elected President of the European Parliament in 1987, he did so having actively courted the support of Le Pen's Front Nationale, defeating the Socialist candidate for the job in the process.

It was not until the third set of European Parliament elections in June 1989 that Labour was sufficiently united on Europe to defeat the Conservatives and win a majority of UK seats (forty-five). The balance of opinion in the Labour Group swung in favour of Europe. With a slogan of Meet the Challenge, Make the Change,



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I would certainly oppose a referendum in which the only options were FPTP or AV....
Dugsie (Yorks)

Dugsie, to the surprise of none I'm sure, I agree with your analysis....
Paul McLean (Leeds)

Nobody should be excluded from the debate and making the completely

and a strong environmental message, Labour became more constructively engaged in the legislative process, often spearheading important long-running campaigns on environment, workers' rights, animal welfare, human rights and consumer protection. At home they were becoming an important arm of the campaign to elect a Labour government.

The story of Labour's MEPs during the first twenty years of the world's first directly-elected multi-national Parliament has now been written, with a Foreword by Neil Kinnock. It is essential reading for all those with an interest in Britain's role in Europe.

Anita Pollack was political assistant to the late Barbara Castle when she was Leader of the Labour MEPs, then herself MEP for South West London from 1989 - 99. She is the author of Wreckers or Builders? A History of Labour MEPs from 1979 - 99, published in October by John Harper Publishing, ISBN 978-0-9556202-9-4, available from Turpin Distribution 01767 604 951 for £20 including P&P

unsubstantiated accusation that ...

Jon Teunon

Sane 'As for the rest of it, goodness you're a cosy bunch....

Dugsie (Yorks)

Dugsie: "Sane Lee I was having a relatively good day for someone in my situation until your ...

Sane
