

Europe's Modern Prince ? An insider's view of the Party of European Socialists

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Abstract

Seen from the point of view of a senior practitioner in the largest European-level party - the Party of European Socialists - this paper looks at some political circumstances that have driven the development of party politics at the European Union level. Examination of the organisation and politics of the PES gives an insight into the growing legitimacy given by national political élites to Union-level action, and highlights the emergence of a distinct supranational political agenda. The parties could, in this perspective, have a profound influence on the democratic credentials and legitimacy of the Union, both in institutional terms (particularly with the forthcoming Intergovernmental Conference in 1996) and in policy.

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The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appears.¹

I. Introduction

In the post-1945 period we have witnessed a shift from national sovereignty to international interdependence and, with that, a shift away from democratically-accountable decision-making. With the internationalisation of capital finance and business, national political actors have been progressively less able to control economic policy and, as a result of that, other areas of policy.

Over the last two years in particular, not entirely coincidental with the post-Maastricht ratification, there have been ever more admissions by political leaders, at least "off the record", of the increasing impotence of national political power: They may well still control the levers of power, but it remains to be seen whether these levers are any more connected to the political and economic system².

As more legislation is determined at the European level, therefore, national politicians are inevitably concerned to keep it under control. The nature of the legislative procedures within the European Union have not however lent themselves to scrutiny by national politicians, let alone the public, adding this to the malaise of powerlessness.

It is for the moment national governments, accompanied by secretive cabals of mandarins, that are in large part in charge of EU decision-making and themselves responsible for many of petty arguments and incoherent legislative proposals, so often and so easily blamed on "Brussels". The preponderance of the nation state in this institutional set-up has meant that quality EU policy is conditioned by governments concerned, not with "common cause" but with pursuing elusive national interests and placating domestic clientele. Ideology in this context, takes a back seat.

It is true that until the Delors Presidency of the European Commission (1984-1994), economic and administrative questions rather than political ones have dominated the Community's agenda. Delors' challenge was nothing more than a "back to basics" campaign: to rediscover the original aims of the "ever closer Union of the peoples of Europe" as laid out in the preamble to the Treaties of Rome, to reassert the fundamental principle of democracy: that the people should be involved in influencing policy that in turn shapes their lives. For Delors, the Community was an instrument for regaining political control of economic power.

Direct elections in 1979 started a process of explicit public involvement in European questions. Firstly, this gave a political profile to the Community, thus far dominated by a diplomatic service mentality of intergovernmentalism; Secondly, it gave political legitimacy to the whole operation. The incremental developments of parliamentary involvement in European policy making, with the powers more recently accorded under the Single European Act and the Treaty on European Union, have brought the role of the European Parliament centre stage.

Meanwhile, a great variety of morbid symptoms appears: the rise of nationalism and racism; the seeming ease with which immigrants and minorities become the scapegoats for deeper structural economic ills; the chaos in money markets sparked by the near collapse of the Exchange Rate Mechanism and predatory speculation; the emergence of a new breed of right wing, anti-European, populist politico-industrialists, such as Jimmy Goldsmith and Silvio Berlusconi; Low voter turnout and so-called 'democratic fatigue'; Brussels-bashing, in particular the favourite bloodsport of Eurocrat-bashing; national party crises.

All these symptoms have one phenomenon in common: a crisis of confidence, implicitly or explicitly, in the ability of nation states and their agents to deliver, whether it is jobs, social justice, security, economic and monetary stability.

This crisis is felt most acutely within the national political classes. They have to come to terms with the contradiction of, on the one hand, holding on to a declining national field of action and on the other, the potential offered by further international integration. To face up to this in the current climate of hostility - particularly towards the institutions of Europe - is to invite more questions and problems than most national parties are willing or able to deal with. To go public with it poses a further dilemma: how can one maintain support and credibility if one accepts that the emperor, after all, has no clothes? Sooner or later, therefore, national leaders have had to come to terms with the limitations on their own power as well as the need to cooperate in developing policies on a wider canvas.

The Intergovernmental Conference foreseen for 1996, preparations for which are under way on all fronts, is only going to throw these problems into sharper relief. It will be a crossroads not so much for the future direction and depth of European integration, as for the future role and nature of the modern European nation state. When one considers the more generalised crisis of party politics, what is at stake is the survival and development of an "interface" between the public and the levers of European political and economic power.

The omens thus far - in the opening exchanges between Europhiles and Europhobes - are not promising. Key to the process will be the role of European-level political parties and federations. They provide a unique and ideologically driven forum, bringing together both national and European actors. Their ability to confront and -who knows? - resolve these crises (both of public confidence and of the locus of political power), may well shape the political map of Europe for a generation.

II. Development of the PES

In this paper I want to look at the development of the Party of European Socialists (PES). Simon Hix and Robert Ladrech cover, in their papers, more detail of the birth and development of the European party federations and the place that they now occupy on the European stage. I want to look briefly, and from a less rigorously academic perspective, at how socialist parties in Europe³ have come to realise a European vocation.

To do this, I would like to test the progress of the PES against some pretty stern criteria laid down by the then PES President, Willy Claes, in his first major speech after taking up office in 1992.

Claes argued that the authority of the new Party would depend on its ability to address some key concerns. For him, these were⁴:

That there is an objective gap in European 'political society'. Whilst there is a clearly evolving and distinct European polity, this cannot be said for the civil and political society that should accompany it according to many nation state models. It is true that many pressure groups and lobby organisations have woken to the importance and relevance of European policy making to their work, but we are yet to see real European parties or politicians.

That national parties will provide the necessary organic development of European parties, and not amendments to the treaties, which can at best provide a functional framework. For Claes, well accustomed as Belgian's Foreign Minister to the intricacies of Brussels horse-trading, there is no point in top-down initiatives that had little or no support at the base.

That any truly European party must have some structural relationship with political power at the European Community level. Given the complexity of the institutional layer in the European Community, and rendered more so with the so-called "pillar structure" of the European Union⁵, connecting parties and party politics to those power centres would not be the easily identified task that it often is at a national level.

For Claes therefore, a European party must reflect the specific nature of Community decision-making and not just mimic the model of national parties.

That a European party must have a direct effect on democratising the Community.

That the party should be judged by its ability to react to and shape the European political agenda

That the party must be a nerve centre for an increased flow of ideas between national parties and the E.P. parliamentary group in order to develop a European social-democratic strategy

Claes argued that there was a lack of a distinctly European campaign for the European elections, something only a European party could properly provide.

That the party needs to take up the challenge of a new political culture in the face of the decline of the nation state.

Known until 1992 as the Confederation of Socialist Parties in the European Community, the name change to the Party of European Socialists (PES) at the 1992 "founding" Congress in The Hague, came as the cosmetic cherry atop a cake of qualitative reforms.

One obvious catalyst for change was the inclusion of a reference to the role of "political parties at the European level" in the 1991 Treaty on European Union⁶. As Claes himself has pointed out, a legal reference cannot substitute for the political will of national parties to act, but as it is there, the PES (and the other political families) have attempted to address the opportunities and problems this new legal base throws up.

This issue has not been as straightforward as national parties had originally anticipated. At first, and maybe quite cynically, many believed the debate would be essentially about money: a legal base means recognition, and recognition brings resources, as the Parliamentary political groups know all too well. Indeed, the parties, rather than the political groups in the Parliament, stand to gain control of the important "Information campaign" resources destined, from the Union budget, to promote the Union through the political families. This function is clearly hinted at in the new Treaty article.

A European Party created or sustained by a European Union legal base is no longer the pet of its creators. An independent legal identity commits the member parties, if not irrevocably at least substantially, to sustaining the organisation politically. The availability of independent resources is sufficient motivation to maintain involvement, and through that, control over its orientation.

If one looks at the legal status of national political parties in many Western European states, it is often tightly bound up with the constitutional provisions of the respective electoral system. Transposed to the European Union context, and particularly given the provision in the Treaties⁷, one can establish a

link between the legal recognition of European parties and their place in a future common electoral system for the European Parliament elections, and thus the interface between the public and the European institutions⁸.

In the late summer of 1992, the national leaders of the Party of European Socialists agreed to meet for two days in Portugal for an informal "think-in". That the meeting took place at all was remarkable enough; that it took place away from the media and public attention, and without advisors or assistants, all the more so. But the most remarkable was the way, in the relaxed atmosphere of a mountainside monastery, the leaders sat down as equals in this European arena of party leaders, whatever their status in other national and European fora. For one of the first times that I have witnessed, party leaders did not defer or pull rank according to national or governmental, protocol, criteria.

Over the two days there were a series of comments about the failure of national strategies on major policy questions, particularly as regards the persistent problem of unemployment. It begged the question as to whether national polities are any longer capable of replying to these questions, and the leaders acted on the logic of their reflections in setting up a high level working group to propose a European strategy to what was now identified as a European problem.

This working group was also a first. Unlike the different working groups set up by the PES and the Confederation before it, (that tended to ramble without conclusions or clear objectives and suffered a lack of political authority because of lack of high enough participation by national parties) this group was to be made up by "personal representatives of the Party Leaders, with the authority and mandate to speak and act on behalf of their respective leader."⁹ It was chaired by former Swedish Finance Minister, Allan Larsson¹⁰ and produced a substantive report, that sought to strengthen the initiative of Commission President, Jacques Delors on economic recovery, growth and employment. The PES considered further action in this policy area at its Party Leaders' Conference in June 1995, with the creation of an Employment Commission, to be chaired by Jacques Delors himself.

Another first was the 1994 Manifesto: although the statutes of the Confederation provided for a "common platform for the European Elections", no manifesto was produced in 1979¹¹, and in 1984 and 1989 texts were only agreed with formal reserves (or "footnotes" in Euro-speak) by three parties. Early in 1993, from the outset of negotiations on the manifesto, a number of important principles were established.

Firstly, it was agreed that the Congress necessary to approve the document would be held within the timetable stipulated in the statutes¹². This was agreed to as a form of self-discipline that allowed a sufficient lead-time between adoption and the elections themselves¹³, and allowed the manifesto and its principal messages to be incorporated into national party campaign strategies. This was achieved, with the adoption taking place in November 1993 at the special congress held, symbolically, in the new hemicycle of the European Parliament in Brussels.

Secondly, that the PES manifesto would be the manifesto for all national parties. Once agreed, national parties would not go away and produce their own version or start playing around with what was agreed. This was largely achieved, with national parties using not just the agreed text but also the house style and presentation of the European manifesto. This was a significant step in terms of developing a collective corporate identity under the PES banner.

Thirdly, it was agreed that the manifesto adoption would be the subject of a major public launch that would signal the opening of the long term campaign for the elections. The Congress drew some 1500 participants and 600 press.

Finally, there would be some European-level coordination of national campaigns with the PES per se playing an active role. The PES did set up a series of initiatives in this field and campaign managers from the national parties met together on several occasions to discuss these. Although it is clear that the national parties followed strictly domestic agenda and concerns when it came to the detail of their

respective campaign plans, the European level coordination did have some influence, if only by pooling initiatives and learning from each other.

Further, the PES launched a new corporate image to consolidate the statutory changes agreed in the 1992 founding congress. Significantly, the Socialist Group in the European Parliament took two related decisions. Firstly, to abandon their own logo and take the PES' own; secondly to change their name from "Socialist Group European Parliament" to "PES Group in the European Parliament", both decisions underlining the group's place under the PES umbrella.

The PES, in structural terms, remains a confederal organisation: as such the attitude and role of the national party leaders is instrumental to the fate of the Party: It is sufficient for one party leader to actively block an initiative for that initiative to be still born or put on indefinite hold, as happened in 1991 when Neil Kinnock of the British Labour Party blocked moves towards a European Socialist Party. Equally, it is necessary for them all to be actively on board for a political project having a chance of success: any initiative that is agreed by national party leaders carries enormous political weight, compared with the relatively "easy" decision making procedures of the Parliamentary Group (that can adopt 'policy' by majority vote).

One of the great qualitative leaps forward in the last years has been the scale and quality of multilateral contacts amongst the party leaders. This has moved Party Leaders' meetings from the realm of polite and diplomatic, intergovernmental-style discourse, to a more robust forum where criticism is more open and a sense of "common cause" is emerging.

In 1992, the Party took the high risk decision to hold its Party Leaders' meetings on the eve of, and in the same venue as, the European Council summits. This had the double advantage of thrusting the Party into the media limelight surrounding Council summits, and of securing a higher participation by Party leaders holding governmental office (and considerably adding to the overall political weight of the proceedings).

Indeed, as they become fora for high level debate with a direct feed into the Commission and the Council, the PES is recognised as a distinct network useful for national parties to gain support for particular national questions.

The Parliamentary Group has also changed its attitude. Although, among the European political actors, probably the best resourced, it has moved from a position of being a protagonist for sweeping, federal, advances towards a European socialist party with involvement of an active membership; to one of constructive engagement with national party authorities, socialist Commissioners and socialist ministers.

One example of the shift in attitude was at the Party Leaders' Conference in June 1994, in Corfu, Greece. This meeting had set three principal objectives: to make a political assessment of the European Parliament elections, held a fortnight earlier; to agree a 'leadership package' of socialists in key posts in the European Parliament and the Party; and to highlight political priorities for the coming legislature.

In 1989, a political deal had been put together by less than a dozen party leaders on the sidelines of a meeting of the Socialist International in Stockholm. In contrast, in 1994, the 'deal' was not only struck within the formal structure of the European Party - the Party Leaders' Conference - but was done so together with the new heads of the national delegations within the Parliamentary Group, adding legitimacy and involvement to the process.

To this, it should be added that the leadership 'package deal' at the Corfu Leaders' Conference was preceded by nearly eight months of intense political discussions. Firstly, there was the European Employment Initiative: not only the first PES working group operating under the direct authority of the party leaders, but a long term project that identified where pressure can be exerted, strategically and tactically, on the Union's institutions regarding the socialists' priority issue: employment. Secondly, the

manifesto, adopted by the special Congress in Brussels in late 1993, in which participated most of the socialist candidates for the forthcoming European elections.

More than in 1989, Group members were aware that their respective national leaders had met together within the framework of the PES before the opening of the new legislature to agree on a 'package deal' of key political posts, that would include a recommendation for the Leader of their own Group as well as for their candidate for President of Parliament.

This is of significance because in 1989 there was a high degree of 'backbench' resentment against deals being struck before and without consultation of the members: there was a sense that decisions were being imposed by party leaders, 'outsiders' and the Group's autonomy was being undermined. In 1994 there was none of this: rather, there was a sense of occasion and of responsibility.

The 1994 Parliament in general also sharpened its ideological profile. Within the Socialist Group, despite more than 50% new members, there was a great sense of common cause, from their first meeting in July 1994: not only had there been a common European manifesto for the first time, but there was a genuine optimism based not on the overall (and, in absolute figures, rather mediocre) results of the June elections, but on the fact that the socialists were still the largest and most coherent political group, whilst the tradition centre-right had suffered serious setbacks and new splits were opening further to the right, with the entry on the scene of the Italian-based Forza Europa and the French-led Groupe de l'Europe des Nations, led by Goldsmith and Phillipe de Villiers.

Two specific issues throw the importance of this early coherence into focus. Already during the election campaign, concern had been expressed by the rise of the neo-fascist *Allianza Nazionale* in Italy and their acceptance into the mainstream by the recently elected Berlusconi Government: a clear decision was made by the PES Group therefore to isolate Berlusconi's party in the new European Parliament. This put the Christian-democrat European People's Party on the spot in the later stages of the election campaign, as they were persistently challenged by socialists to distance themselves from what would otherwise be natural allies, akin to the British conservatives¹⁴.

The PES Parliamentary Group's ideological coherence was put to the test at a very early stage on in the new legislature. The PES Leaders, in their traditional declaration at the end of the Corfu meeting, emphasising once more their central concern with employment, stated that:

The Parliament has new responsibilities in the process of appointing members of the Commission. As soon as the European Council has nominated a new President, we will invite him or her to consultations on our strategy to fight mass unemployment in Europe¹⁵.

The Party Leaders called on the new parliamentary group to judge the new Commission against the benchmark of the earlier PES report on employment¹⁶: indeed, the Group took this to heart, and invited President-designate Jacques Santer to face the Group and answer questions specifically regarding the Delors plan and the PES' own employment initiative. If internal discipline in the Parliamentary Group had been greater, it is difficult to see how Santer could have won the Parliamentary vote of confidence (as it was, he won by some 20 votes)¹⁷.

The confirmation hearings held by the European Parliament in January 1995, for the newly nominated Commissioners, were less impressive and certainly lower key than their counterparts in the US Senate. What hit the headlines had been the threat from MEPs to refuse to endorse the new Commission. The Treaty on European Union confers on the Parliament this right¹⁸ and there was a tension, voiced publicly and privately by many MEPs, between their instinct to exercise such an institutional right (particularly given the dissatisfaction expressed by many with the credentials of at least five of the future college of nineteen) and the loyalty they may feel towards particular Commissioners-designate who would risk not being reappointed by their respective national governments following a rejection by the European Parliament¹⁹.

All the same, there were a number of interesting features of the hearings: for example, the demand by Parliament that individual Commissioners indicate their political allegiance or orientation. The Parliament laid out from the outset that it expected to gain a clear insight into the political profile and concerns of the overall Commission. This was expressed most clearly by PES Group Leader in the European Parliament, Pauline Green, in her new year message to the Group and staff:

"We believe that the people of Europe should be able to see and hear European Commissioners responding publicly to questions from democratically elected Members of Parliament. The people we represent want to know whether the policies of the incoming Commission correspond to their aspirations....I give notice to the new Commissioners that the PES Group places great importance on the public hearings and will only take a decision on whether or not to formally ratify their appointment after all hearings are concluded and a proper assessment made of its collective strengths and weaknesses²⁰.

It is perhaps a little premature to expect future Commissioners to swear an oath of allegiance to their respective political party's European manifesto. All the same, MEPs did seek issue based allegiance to their ideas. At a general level, this included requests for commissioners views on the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference and relations with the European Parliament. At a more specific level, at least among the socialist MEPs, was the request for commissioners to comment both on the Delors report on recovery and growth and the PES report on employment. Socialist MEPs agreed already at their constituent meeting of the new legislature in 1994 to use this landmark PES report as a benchmark by which they would judge the Commission and the Council.

It has not escaped the PES' notice either that the nine socialist Commissioners form the largest and most cohesive political bloc within the new Commission. All have a strong party profile and, at the Party Leaders' Conference in Essen in December 1994, in which they participated, they expressed their hope that there would be greater coordination among the socialist commissioners and greater contact with the Party Leaders. This is of particular importance if the PES is to raise its profile in shaping a pre-legislative agenda: helping shape Union policy, rather than reacting to it.

It is of even greater importance in a new Commission without a president of the stature of Jacques Delors: as the Commission operates as a collegiate, and takes many of its policy initiating decisions by majority vote, any leadership vacuum can be filled by a coherent and well-prepared left minority leading the college through its ideas. This, however, should not be overstated: socialists are keenly aware that some of the key portfolios - economic policy, external relations, for example - are held by conservative commissioners. Nonetheless, in the package of responsibilities agreed between the Vice-Presidents of the PES following their nomination at the 1995 Barcelona Congress, one Vice-President, and Belgian party leader, Philippe Busquin, has been given responsibility for coordinating socialist Commissioners.

In another arena, the setting-up of the Committee of the Regions in 1994, under the provisions of the Maastricht Treaty, was greeted with mixed feelings. Some felt that it could undermine the position of the Parliament if it became to be seen as its equal, at least by the Council; others that it could contain the seeds of a future second chamber that would ultimately replace the Council.

Once established however, the PES acted quickly. It decided that, far from being organised internally along national lines (as indeed the Council was envisaging, with resources being proposed to support 'national delegations') or according to authority type (the main dividing line being between local and regional authorities, and whose respective and long standing European associations were hoping would be the basis of operation), the Committee should reflect ideological cleavages. This view was shared also by the European People's Party. After much agonizing and negotiating, a PES Group in the Committee of the Regions was established in autumn 1994 and political groups were recognised within the operational rules of the Committee, in much the same way as happens in Parliament.

It was never a foregone conclusion, however and the mandate of individual members highlights the problem: they are nominated by national governments to represent their respective local or regional

authority. However, one of the most telling exchanges in the first meeting of socialists showed up the clash of different logics: One German member argued that his first loyalty could not be to the newly established socialist group, as - in his position as a Land President - he must represent his authority. The retort from a French member was quick: how did the comrade come to be Land President if it was not because of his party's endorsement and support ?

The most problematic institution has been the Council. Although formally and legally an institution of the Union, and legislator for most proposals coming from the Commission, the Council has largely the character and modus operandi of an intergovernmental, diplomatic, institution.

Jacques Delors commented at the Party Leaders' Conference in Corfu that a lack of any sense of common cause in the organs of the Council was threatening to strangle EU decision-making in the near future. With the "sometimes honourable exception" of the General Affairs Council - the regular meeting of European foreign affairs ministers that discusses main lines of policy and strategy - he expressed his exasperation that national ministers saw too little of each other and thus came to Brussels to fight their corner and limit potential national damage from any EU legislative initiative. He expressed his hope that the PES would learn a lesson from this and help develop a collective sense of identity through regular party political contacts.

There have been repeated calls over the last year within the PES to look at this question: Indeed, some of our national parties in opposition now see some scope for cooperating with sister parties as a 'back-door' way to influencing policy making in the Council, from which they feel excluded at a national level because of lack of democratic, parliamentary scrutiny of their government ministers' actions in Council.

Firstly, there have been requests that socialist ministers meet together as a caucus before key Council meetings to discuss common tactics. This ideological profiling has not been easy for three key reasons. Firstly, a minister attending Council meetings is rarely a free agent: he or she will have a clear and fixed mandate which binds a collective not just an individual; secondly, a socialist minister in a coalition government must put loyalty to coalition partners before loyalty to his or her European family; and thirdly, ministers themselves often do not attend but are replaced by civil servants who, obviously, could not become part of our political networking.

This said, experience within the PES over the last few years - during which senior socialist ministers have been involved in our Party Leaders discussions - has shown that the higher the PES aims, the more there is scope for political manoeuvre.

Secondly, there has been the request to approach and consult socialist ministers on specific policy questions. In the near future, this is more likely to be successful. This approach is necessarily more long term and is being examined in a wider context of developing a coherent socialist approach to policy evolution²¹. from an initiative's inception within the Commission, following the whole legislative process right through to its implementation at a national level.

Such cooperation is clearly opportune for the national parties themselves: They can use such networking when in opposition in order to put their respective national governing party or parties on the spot, keeping abreast of Union policy initiatives by dint of their political family rather than through institutional channels and preparing themselves for government nationally. In this context socialist ministers are also part of a wider network that also involves national parties and socialists in the other institutions.

It is through such networking, that the PES hopes to create 'common cause' within its political family. One practical manifestation of this aim is the "socialist Sherpa" project: in tune with the six-monthly Council presidency, each national party will shadow its respective national government as it prepares for the European Council Summit and coordinate the socialists amongst the "Sherpas" of COREPER. This has the twin aim of feeding into the Council policy preparation and feeding the PES early indications of the Council's political agenda.

To understand fully developments within the PES, however, it is necessary to go beyond the Union's institutions. There has been increasing pressure - if not yet satisfaction of the demand - for greater involvement in the European party, by those in national parties. This can be divided broadly into three separate but related questions: can and should individual members of national member parties have a role to play in the European Party ?; how can national party élites make a European profile to their work through involvement in the European Party ?; and how can other non-party, European, actors (such as trades unions, youth and women's organisations) become involved ?

The first question comes, on a formal level, down to the representative structure of the Party. Despite having a biennial Congress with some 500 delegates, the political reality is that these delegates are chosen by the national party leaderships and expected to follow the direction of those leaderships. It would be unfair, on the other hand, to dismiss them as window dressing: the structure of the Congress, with a high emphasis on small discussion fora and plenty of socialising "space", allows (and is even consciously intended to encourage) informal contacts and networking.

Further, the Party Leaders' Conferences have taken on an unprecedented importance. They are no more quiet gatherings of party leaders and a few ancillary support staff. As an example, the Party Leaders' meeting in Essen 1994 attracted more than 300 participants, all party leaders bar two (with valid excuses), all socialist Commissioners bar one, seven heads of Government, the Presidents of the European Commission and the European Parliament, and eight Foreign Secretaries. It has become the networking forum for European socialists, with as much to be gained and discussed behind the scenes as on the formal agenda.

The recent Congress in Barcelona went further than ever before in detailing objectives for the development of the European Party as a network, explicitly calling for the creation and development of an Information and Communications network - pesnet - that had already been the subject of some discussion in 1994.

This network has the dual aim of developing a network for information exchange between European socialists and national parties; and providing a forum to discuss and plan Union-wide campaign initiatives to influence key legislative items and bring more national actors into (at least an understanding of) the European policy making processes.

With a number of national parties now coming on to the Internet and using new technologies to improve their information and communications networks²², the PES - and, possibly more keenly (because more directly affected), the PES Parliamentary Group - is looking at how it can use its resources to improve communications, to keep national parties informed on what the European Parliament and Commission are doing and getting feedback on proposed socialist positions through "early warning systems".

The network is also intended to be project and issue oriented: the idea is to introduce national "front-benchers" to the European legislative processes relevant to their specific policy areas and see how PES level coordination can bring problematic legislation within the scope of domestic political campaigning. Further it is intended to involve national campaign strategists in coordinating Union-wide activity for key policy issues coming before the Commission, Parliament and Council in a way that the parties can be pro-active rather than reactive to European legislation.

The most recent project example involves the role of the European Party in preparing a socialist strategy for the forthcoming, and already much debated, Intergovernmental Conference in 1996. Many if not most of the PES member parties have set up or are setting up working groups to develop their party's position. The PES Parliamentary Group has established its own high powered group to feed into the European Parliament's work.

At the Party Leaders' Conference in Essen in December 1994, concern was expressed by the Parliamentary Group, by many national parties and by the President of the Commission that this

mushrooming of working groups threatens to confuse and undermine any chances of a coherent approach. The Leaders therefore agreed to proposals to establish a PES working group on 1996 to be the mother of all working groups.

As with the Larsson working group on employment, this working group has the authority of the Leaders and in many cases, the national party representatives on the group are the chairs or rapporteurs of their party's national working group. This may seem nothing more than a logical arrangement, but was unheard of even five years ago within the Confederation.

The Parliamentary Group and the socialist Commissioners will have a direct feed in to the revision process. The Parliamentary Group will have a substantial influence on the Parliament's contribution to the 'Reflection Group' established to prepare ideas for the Intergovernmental Conference; The nine socialist Commissioners will have an influence on the official proposals for Treaty amendments put forward to the IGC. The Group has already urged the European Party to move quickly if it wants to give political guidance to their work. The PES working group is also proposing to bring socialist Commissioners together at an early stage to discuss their contribution.

One interesting theme already emerging from the working group is the concern to bridge the public credibility gap: for there to be any chance of success - particularly after the lessons of the Maastricht ratification - the negotiators must not become bogged down in technical and bureaucratic details, but maintain, and publicly proclaim, a down to earth and meaningful message.

It can be seen therefore that the PES will not only be playing a major role in developing and coordinating an overall strategy, but its role is recognised and accepted by the actors directly involved in the Treaty revision process.

Raising such a policy initiative has concentrated minds on the complexity of the decision-making processes in the Union and the need to act in various fora and different ways. Further, it has raised the prospect for joint action by national parties, under the aegis of the PES, to bring pressure to bear on the decision-making institutions: in this sense, it is true, the PES demonstrates the character more of a pressure group than a party, but this is possibly symptomatic of a lack of a comprehensive legislative agenda at the European level akin to that around which national parties traditionally mobilise support.

There are other indications of the maturing of the European party. The effort dedicated to establishing the leadership of the Party also demonstrates progress: from a situation of uncontested and relatively low profile debates about the "Confederation" presidency to the situation today where the issue has involved many more actors and where the name or nationality are only as important (but not more important) as the profile and competence for the tasks ahead.

a. break with Corfu accord: decided on merit not on nationality

In this context, it is interesting that the so-called 'Corfu rules' (whereby no national party should walk away with more than one slice of the leadership pie), was abandoned in Essen when the Presidency was decided effectively not by nationality but by merit. This puts the organisation clearly on the map as regards organisational legitimacy.

Some would go further and now explore the relationship between these developing European parties and the wider debate about publicly legitimating the European institutions: should not the European parties, for example, themselves be involved in selecting candidates for the European Parliament elections, and should there not be a uniform electoral system - as required by the Treaties - that reflected the need to involve European level actors, rather than only national parties²³?

If one extrapolates the logic further, should not the head of European party lists be precisely those parties' proposed candidate for the leadership of the Union's executive? The mandate of the Commission is now tied, in procedure as well as timetable, to the legislative periods of the Parliament. It does not require a major conceptual leap to tying the results of European elections to the shape of the subsequent Commission. This may be idle speculation, but the fact that a current PES working group is even discussing such ideas is itself a significant step forward.

III. Conclusions

I have tried to sketch out some of the ways in which I believe the Party of European Socialists has substantively evolved from the loose Confederation that preceded it. The question remains to what extent these developments give authority to the PES, along the lines and criteria former President Willy Claes laid down, as an actor on the European political scene.

It has been argued that a distinct civil society at the level of the European Union is beginning to emerge: it is sufficient to consider the number and scope of the different interest groups that currently organise at, or direct their efforts to, this European level. The related question is, however, is: can we yet see an emergent European political society, given that so much of the history of developments of the European Communities and the European Union has been dominated by bureaucratic, top-down, models of integration and intergovernmental policy making. The emergence of the European Parliament as a policy co-actor has brought the question into keener focus.

The development of European parties beyond 'clearing houses' for the mutual exchange of national political discourse, and into the policy shaping arena at the European Union level, is evidence of a developing, if yet still immature, political society.

As a party becomes successful it starts to attract the attention of like minded groups and encourage the creation of particular interest groups. This is as true for the Party of Europe Socialists as it is for national parties. It is a test of a party's relevance to a particular polity that it is able to play a role in bringing together interest groups within civil society, the party itself playing its role within political society.

At the time of the PES' creation, the youth organisation of all its member parties launched a parallel initiative to create a specific socialist youth structure within the European Union. ECOSY - the European Community Organisation of Socialist Youth - sought from the outset to link itself directly to the European party.

More recently, a number of women's organisations of the member parties wanted to create a specific structure, modelled on the Socialist International Women. The PES Bureau acceded to an extent by establishing a women's standing committee of the European party.

In addition, the European association of socialist mayors and regional authority leaders - for many years informally, and very inconspicuously, associated with the former Confederation - has started to become more actively involved in the PES

All of these organisations have identified (as indeed have the Parliamentary Group, the socialist Commissioners and many national ministers), a real and qualitative change in the nature of the European organisation.

Only time will tell whether their involvement, and the involvement of others such as trade unions, cooperatives and consumer groups, will combine with the new found political authority to develop a European party worthy of such a denomination, even in the specific context of the European Union's decision making.

Will the interregnum, the crisis whose historically normal solution is blocked... be resolved in favour of a restoration of the old²⁴

To clarify...

The PES is the Party of European Socialists, established in 1992 from the former Confederation of Socialist Parties of the European Community. The Socialist Group in the European Parliament is now

referred to as the PES Group or, since the constitution of a group in the Committee of the Regions, the PES Parliamentary Group. The phrase European Socialists is used to refer to socialist office holders in the European institutions as well as the leaderships of the national parties, the PES Group and others cooperating within the structures of the PES.