

# Foreword

Joyce Quin

I welcome the opportunity to contribute a Foreword to this book about European Parliamentary elections since 1979. It is an innovative volume which, in a way I have not seen done before, describes the European election campaigns in different EU countries from the time of their becoming EU members and where each chapter draws on the election literature published by the different parties. This means that the descriptions of the campaigns are grounded in reality and facts—in itself a welcome change from the many opinions expressed about European elections and the European Parliament which all too frequently seem to be based neither on facts nor on extensive research.


This book is also making a very timely appearance as its publication coincides with the run up to the 2024 European Parliamentary elections, due to be held on 6-9<sup>th</sup> June. This time of course the elections are not taking place in the UK, as a result of Brexit. However there will be keen political interest in the outcome among observers in the UK as well as across the EU, both because of what the results may mean in terms of the direction of the EU as a whole and what it means in terms of political trends and changes in the different member countries. Reflecting on the political situation in France, for example, there is already much speculation as to whether the results will strengthen President Macron in his negotiations with the majority in the National Assembly. The President's situation may be made more difficult as a result, for example, of a swing towards the anti-European and anti-Macron forces of the nationalist right-wing.

My own interest in the European elections is two-fold. I began working life as a University Lecturer teaching European politics way back in the 1970s. I then experienced the first UK elections to the European Parliament as a Labour candidate in 1979 when, after a difficult campaign, I won a narrow victory to become the first elected MEP in my home area of Tyne and Wear. The memory of that campaign has remained with me vividly ever since and in reading this book I have been struck by the common threads and themes in European elections across the EU as well as some of the differences between them and the changes that have taken place over the years. As this volume effectively shows, this is very much a story both of continuity and change.

Thinking back to those first elections there was an obvious difference between the elections

in the UK and those elsewhere across Europe. The UK was the only country to operate a constituency, first-past-the-post system, rather than a proportional system with party lists of candidates. Given the number of MEPs allocated to the UK this meant that the constituencies were on average eight or nine times the size of a Westminster constituency. In Tyne and Wear, the constituency comprised over 500,000 voters and someone calculated—possibly spuriously—that it would take all day, every day, for nine years for a candidate to call on every elector! It was therefore a daunting task to engage voters with the issues involved. However there were some obvious links between the European Community and the constituency which could be highlighted to show the relevance of the elections, the main ones being shipbuilding, fishing, and European grants for disadvantaged regions. Tyne and Wear had a third of the UK's shipbuilding capacity at that time but the industry was impacted by European as well as national rules and faced retraction, restructuring and job losses. The EEC fisheries policy had begun to impact the UK and in Tyne and Wear there was the North Sea fishing port of North Shields. The area as a whole was also eligible to receive some of the increasing expenditure in European regional and social policy and already local Councils were involved in putting schemes forward for assistance. These economic issues, rather than issues relating to individual constituents (which were naturally directed much more to Westminster MPs) predominated. The national Labour party campaign—a hesitant campaign based on opposition to the EU and a reluctance to participate in the elections at all—made little mention of issues of direct local relevance and so with scant resources we produced a leaflet of our own (in black and white, colour being too expensive!) in addition to the national leaflet available.

Labour was also bruised by the victory of Mrs Thatcher in the general election a month earlier in May 1979 which also meant that many party workers and activists were demotivated by that defeat and did not relish further electioneering. As someone who had voted 'yes' to Europe in the 1975 Referendum and who wanted to play a positive and cooperative role in the European Parliament from the outset I found it all a challenging experience. Five years later in the 1984 elections, which I also fought, the mood of the Tyne and Wear electorate was strongly influenced by the scarring experience of the dramatic



Labour  
UK

*Joyce Quin pictured at a recent European Conference*

### Why Labour? because . . .

Labour Euro - M.P.'s will work full-time. Only Labour has rejected the idea of the "dual mandate" which allows Westminster M.P.'s to be European M.P.'s at the same time.

The Labour government's job creation schemes have helped the North-East. The Conservatives wish to cut public expenditure. With Labour's record Labour Euro-candidates can argue for similar job creation policies within the E.E.C.

Labour is used to co-operating with European political parties and will work for change to benefit consumers and working people throughout Europe.


**LABOUR WILL FIGHT  
FOR YOU IN EUROPE**

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| <b>QUIN</b> | <b>X</b> |
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JUNE 7th 7.00 a.m. - 10.00 p.m.

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# DO YOU WANT AN ACTIVE EURO-M.P.? VOTE




JOYCE QUIN

## LABOUR, THE COMMON MARKET AND YOU

### Local Issues



**Joyce talking to fishermen in North Shields**

Joyce Quin will work for measures to protect our fishing industry. She wants to see an E.E.C. policy which will allow us maximum access to our traditional fishing grounds together with adequate conservation of fish stocks. A new policy is needed to end the present uncertainty in the industry and to release E.E.C. funds for the development of North Shields fish quay.



**Shipbuilding**

Joyce will press for E.E.C. aid to the shipbuilding industry and for policies to ensure a fair share-out of orders in the present crisis, particularly to areas where unemployment is highest. Grants from the E.E.C. social fund for training should be given to help maintain a skilled workforce so that British shipbuilding can take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the expected upturn in demand in the 1980's.

**Joyce Quin says:**

**We need vigorous European M.P.'s to work for the following changes:-**

1. A reduction in food prices through a reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and an end to the scandal of food mountains.
2. A reduction in the British contribution to the Community budget by bringing contributions into line with a country's level of prosperity.
3. The creation of more jobs in the North-East by getting more grants from E.E.C. funds and by working for more effective regional and social policies.
4. The adoption of new industrial policies which will promote a balanced economic prosperity and a direction of economic activity into less well-off regions such as our own.

Image: My campaign leaflet from the inaugural 1979 European Elections.

demise of regional industries such as coal, steel, and shipbuilding, under the Thatcher government. As a result, the outcome, although once again based on a very low turn-out, was a very large Labour majority.

Perhaps because of the need to report back to their individual constituencies, but also because most UK MEPs elected in 1979 were not well-known national politicians, both Conservative and Labour MEPs concentrated fulltime on their European work and made their mark as assiduous attenders. This was commented on by the Parliament's splendid first President, the former French Minister, Simone Veil, who in her autobiography contrasted ruefully the part-time attitude of many French MEPs in comparison to the British, despite the UK's more equivocal attitude overall to EEC membership.

The Conservatives in 1979 won 60 seats to Labour's 17 (and the Liberals none) so theirs was the dominant UK voice in the first European Parliament—and a very pro-European voice it was in its majority. Indeed, one of the biggest and most dramatic changes in European politics over the years has been the evolution of the Conservatives from a pro-EU position to a sceptical or anti-EU stance. In contrast, comparably notable and rapid was the movement in the 1980s from Labour having an anti-European policy to adopting a pro-European approach.

While the European constituencies were unwieldy, my own recollections of being an MEP was that the constituency work in many ways was the most satisfying part of the job because it gave the MEP a unique role—that of examining European legislation not just for its effects on the country as a whole but on the different regions and sub-regions of the country, something which no-one else was doing. Amending legislation to take into account the needs of a particular area or industry was surprisingly feasible even in the early days of the EP, and made the work worthwhile and special.

A major turning point in the history of the European elections in the UK was the adoption of the regional list system of proportional representation for the European elections in 1999. By that time I was Europe Minister working to Robin Cook as Foreign Secretary. Although we were by treaty obligations under an agreement to move towards a proportional representation system for the elections, I do not remember the Blair government feeling coerced into this move. On the contrary, within government there was some support for the change. However, as has often happened in many countries who change electoral systems, both short-term and long-term results often dashed the hopes of the governing party introducing the changes. In the UK the change did facilitate representation of previously excluded parties. This benefited, as expected, the

Liberals and the Green Party but also allowed UKIP and even the British National Party to win European seats and thereby gain a much higher national profile and publicity. No one introducing the change in 1999 imagined that UKIP/Brexit party would eventually top the poll—a feat which it accomplished in 2014 and which was the first time since 1906 in a UK national election that a party other than Labour or the Conservatives had triumphed.

While the change in the voting system helped minor or non-traditional parties low turnouts in the election were also a factor and the UK has recorded low participation levels in all European elections, with at no time rates going over 40%. A House of Commons Research Paper from the 2009 elections describes UK turn out as 'consistently low relative to other member states since the first EP election in 1979, although the gap appears to have closed since then due to falling turnout elsewhere.' Sadly, therefore, UK voter apathy seems to have been contagious although the impressive turnouts in Greece described in this volume, where in 1994 even in the aftermath of a general election voter participation was over 70%, show that some countries recorded levels of turnout which must have been the envy of UK MEPs.

The most evident finding in this book is that European elections in the different countries have been dominated by national rather than European issues. The elections are seen primarily as a way for parties to advance their national standing and to capitalise on a national mood. Even when European issues are addressed in the election campaigns they are put firmly into the national context with national politicians vowing to fight for their countries interests in Europe, and win victories for their countries through tough negotiations. While of course politicians are elected to represent their constituents and their regions/countries, the concentration on securing national advantages obscures the real nature of the EU and the reality of the work of its institutions. It also oversimplifies and distorts; the EU often gets blamed for things that go wrong, and the national government and parties claim the credit for any successes. Given too that, despite the concentration on national issues, the electorate know that the elections will have no direct effect on the composition of national governments this whole approach has the effect of making the elections seem less important and even irrelevant.

Yet, UKIP's successes suggest that concentrating on European issues in a European election can resonate with voters, so does this mean that if the major, and pro-European parties, had not shied away from European issues they too could have made the European elections more relevant to the

voters? I personally feel—but others may disagree—that over the years the main parties should have made more effort to engage voters with the issues the European Parliament was dealing with. They should also have explained how the powers of the Parliament had greatly evolved from the early days of being largely a consultative body to the processes of co-decision and of initiation of policies which has become the norm. Certainly in the UK, the idea of the European Parliament as a powerless talking shop continued to hold sway long after it had evolved to play a far more influential and central role.

Will this dominance of domestic issues continue into the future or will parties change their strategy to try to inform electors and to combat lower turnouts? The comment in the chapter on Greece in this volume that ‘often politicians themselves were keener on discussing football rather than the results of the EP elections’ sums up the problem perfectly!

While parties at European elections have rarely stressed the role they play in the international political groups in the European Parliament, an interesting issue raised in this book is how far membership of such groups, and the experience of working day by day within such groups, may have influenced how parties conduct their European election campaigns. My overall impression is that the influence of the international groupings on the electoral campaigns of their constituent political parties is slight but that in no way diminishes the importance of the groups in the workings of the Parliament itself. Certainly my own experience as a Labour MEP and then as Europe Minister was that Labour’s role in the Socialist Group was a vital part of their MEPs’ work and, having attended the Group meeting on the last day of UK membership of the Parliament in 2019, I was struck by the heartfelt standing ovation given to the leader of Labour’s MEPs, Richard Corbett, and the tributes MEPs from across the EU made to him and his colleagues.

In the case of the British Conservatives MEPs a different evolution took place however. Having played an active role as members of the Christian Democratic Group in the Parliament in the early years the growth of Euro-scepticism and the eventual withdrawal of Conservative Members from that Group meant increasing isolation from the European political mainstream. For their part, since gaining representation, the Liberal Democrats, as well as the Greens, have been active members of their respective international groupings, despite the term “Liberal” covering quite a wide range of political stances and policies.

In reading this book a number of other themes have suggested themselves to me. One of the interesting angles to explore further is how integrated

(or not) the MEPs of the various countries are into their national political structures. Busy and conflicting timetables make contact between MEPs and national MPs difficult but my impression is that some countries ensure that their MEPs are heard in government and party circles regularly whereas in others contact is fragmented and largely uncoordinated.

Another interesting question is how is far being elected to the European Parliament is a steppingstone for individuals to then seek election to their National Parliament? While this was much in evidence in the early years it seems now as if it has been replaced by a two-way process—with politicians also frequently moving from the national Parliament into the European Parliament. Indeed, having experience in both Parliaments in my view is something to be welcomed rather than discouraged.

I hope that this book will raise questions and trigger further research and publications. For example, there is potentially fruitful research left to do upon how the media in different countries report European Elections, or how the education and school systems in the different countries inform pupils about the European institutions, as well as teach them about national and local political structures.

Whatever further research might be stimulated as a result of this volume it certainly seems to me to constitute a very valuable study which sheds light on European parliamentary elections in a novel way and will, I believe, be a most useful addition to the existing body of work about this subject, to the benefit of both students and politicians alike.