

# SEIZING THE HIGH GROUND

*Brussels, July 12, 2000*

The EPP parliamentary Group has undergone profound changes during its first year of the 1999 - 2004 European Parliament. Now styling itself *EPP - ED (European Democrats)* to take account of its inclusion of deputies from non-Christian Democratic traditions, the group now numbers 233 MEPs; it is for the first time the biggest single group in the 626-seat parliament. Politically, the group is more apt to co-operate with the Liberal Group than, as in the past, with the second-largest group, the Socialists - an arrangement often criticised as suffocating debate. At a press conference on July 12, parliamentary group president Hans-Gert PÖTTERING (right) drew up a balance sheet, especially on the new *Framework Agreement* on the relationship of Parliament to the Commission. + **Austria:** a welcome message from Romano PRODI + **Developments on a statute for European parties** + Poland: **return to the Lenin shipyard.**



Shifts in the European Parliament often prefigure changes elsewhere on the political landscape. While EPP parties were outgunned by the Social Democrats at national level, the European parliamentary elections last year saw the EPP become - at 233 MEPs - the largest group in the parliaments' history. Its new president, Hans-Gert PÖTTERING, decided to ally with the Liberals, led by the Irishman Pat COX, to secure the presidency of parliament for the French EPP deputy Nicole FONTAINE.

At a press conference on July 12 to mark one year on, Pöttering (right) said that despite its size, and its inclusion of some 30 national parties, the EPP-ED Group was proving more coherent than the Socialist Democrats' 180-strong group. "The Socialists are having problems," Pöttering said. One example had come at the plenary session last week, when the Social Democrats had divided badly on the new Framework Agreement on relations between the European Commission and Parliament. 51 MEPs had voted against, "mainly (British) Labour, so it wasn't a great success for the vice-president of the European Commission (Neil KINNOCK) that his political friends couldn't be won over."

Pöttering said that the under-representation of the EPP in Romano PRODI's Commission - formed last September - had clearly been unfair, given the size of the EPP victory in the elections. Germany's two Commissioners, in particular example, are both of the Left. Despite this, "most of our group showed great European responsibility in supporting the Commission," he said. "We need stable institutions." However, the imbalance in the Commission must not happen again, he warned: "One cannot explain this to the voters."

The new Framework Agreement - now available on the EPP web-site - includes all the points raised by the parliamentary group prior to the Commission's inauguration. It signals "a new quality in our relationship with the Commission," said Pöttering. There was now a "vivid awareness" that Parliament was vital to progress in Europe.

## Main points of the Framework Agreement:

Commissioners can be asked to resign if Parliament expresses no confidence in them;

Commissioners to give priority to attendance in Parliament for subjects in their portfolio.

for the first time, Commission agreement to keep Parliament fully informed at all stages of international agreements and enlargement, and to increase parliamentary involvement in Home Affairs and Justice, and Common Foreign and Security policies.

Pöttering also used his press conference to attack France's intransigent position on sanctions against Austria (*see below*), and to declare that delaying EU enlargement to 2005- 6, as some were now suggesting, would be "a fatal historical error." The EU must be ready for new members by 2003. There would be "very serious consequences" if applicants did not feel they were welcome in the Union. He welcomed the new debate about Europe's future, but rejected proposals for an inter-governmental "Commission-within-the-Commission".



The Austrian example had shown how difficult it was to work outside the EU's institutions; in the same way the frictions between the EU's "High Representative Javier SOLANA and foreign relations Commissioner Chris PATTEN (*left*) were the result of incoherent structures, not personal animosity.

It was important to strengthen the institutions, not weaken them. Pöttering said the test of the upcoming Intergovernmental Conference would be whether it succeeded in introducing majority voting as a rule, with as few exceptions as possible.

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## AUSTRIA - SUPPORT FROM PRODI

In an aside, Pöttering attacked French prime minister Lionel JOSPIN for telling Parliament last week that France would not accept the "Wise Men's" report on Austria, whatever it said, as a reason to lift diplomatic sanctions on Austria during the French presidency, ending in December. This made no sense, he said.



Meanwhile, following a meeting in Brussels between Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang SCHÜSSEL and Romano Prodi, the Commission President said of the sanctions policy: "It's not really up to me to respond, because the sanctions are bilateral and therefore it will be for the individual countries to decide whether they have been effective...But I am not going to avoid the question. I do not think in general that sanctions in such cases give better results than those achieved in a serious in-depth dialogue."

He said he hoped the just-named panel of three "Wise Men" assessing the Austrian coalition's commitment to human rights and combatting racism would present its report as quickly as possible, even if they and the Austrian government had to give up their summer holidays. For his part, Schüssel said a planned "non-binding referendum" on sanctions was not intended as a threat to anyone. He was confident that the "wise men" would deliver an honest judgement by the end of the summer holidays. He again regretted the lack of a time-frame.

In an interview with the German weekly *Rheinische Merkur* (issue of July 14), Schüssel praises his coalition partner for competent work and support for reforms long-blocked by the Socialists. "There was a real sigh of relief in Austria when the new government took over," he said. "Austria is showing how a party like the Austrian Freedom Party can be made to take responsibility."

The three Wise Men writing the report are: former Finnish president Martti AHTISAARI, former Spanish foreign minister and European Commissioner Marcelino OREJA, and the Director of the Max-Planck Institute Jochen FROWEIN. Schüssel said they constituted "a first- class list."

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## **PARTIES AGREEMENT "SOON"**

EPP Secretary-General Alejandro AGAG is delighted with progress on according a clear legal status to European parties such as the EPP. The Commission is now in agreement with adding a phrase to the Treaty on European Union, and this is likely to be agreed at the Nice Summit in December. Ratification by national parliaments may take a further two years.

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## **RETURN TO THE LENIN SHIPYARD**



EPP leaders are to meet at Gdansk on August 29 to give a clear message of support to the enlargement process, as well as to celebrate the achievement of Polish Solidarity 20 years on.

Lech WALESA, the shipyard electrician who sparked off the great revolt against Communist rule in 1980 (photo above), and is now a candidate in the upcoming Polish presidential elections, will be guest of honour.