

## **Part I**

### **Introduction**



# 1

## Euro-Elections 2004 – A Defining Point in European Integration?

*Juliet Lodge*

The European Union remains a model of peaceful conflict resolution. It is a unique and sustainable demonstration of democratic, multinational cooperation. Far more than a multilateral permanent negotiation, it is inspired by the nation state and has the political and institutional attributes of democratic governance and a unique supranational polity thanks in no small measure to the perseverance of the European Parliament.

The 2004 elections to the European Parliament mark something of a defining point in the history of European integration. The 2004 elections seemed simultaneously mundane and an accepted feature of a *sui generis* system, now accepted as a polity in its own right, that a quarter of a century ago had seen politicians fiercely disputing the wisdom and desirability of the people directly electing a European Parliament at all. Then sovereignty and the allegedly deleterious consequences direct elections would herald for state autonomy and sovereignty preoccupied those anxious about supranational institutions and supranational policy-making. In 2004, and compared even to 1999, these issues were settled through the Convention on the Future of Europe, the Inter-Governmental Conferences (IGCs) and the presentation of a draft constitutional treaty due for ratification by all the member states, following national procedures, including referendums in many.

The 2004 elections to the European Parliament were probably the last Euro-elections under the old treaties, and the first in a wider, more heterogeneous, fragmented and disparate Europe. The 2009 elections may be the first under a new Constitution. They occur after the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome in an even wider Europe where the scope of policy sectors tackled at the supranational level will be even wider still, and where territorial political contours representing state boundaries are to be transcended both by the

goals and vision of the Single Market, e-governance and democratic processes entrenched in the new Constitution. The European Parliament has to rise to the challenge of sustaining and making the new democratic polity work openly, effectively, responsively, accountably and democratically.

Twenty-five years after the first ever direct elections to the European Parliament, a new European Parliament was elected by voters in the 25 countries of the newly enlarged European Union (EU). These elections were as historic as the first. The issue of democracy and the democratic credentials of the EU were once again high on the EU's agenda. The European Parliament had transformed the face of the EU's polity since its first direct election in 1979. Its members had worked tirelessly to give expression to parliamentary democracy at the supranational level<sup>1</sup> – from the early Dehousse Reports in 1962 through to the Spinelli and Crocodile initiatives of 1984, the Catherwood Reports on non-Europe, those of David Martin in the 1990s and the Corbett Report in 2003.<sup>2</sup> All showed that not only was the European Parliament a motor for constitutional change and institution-building but that it could accomplish fundamental institutional and constitutional reform by gradual yet bold steps that would challenge the pre-eminence of national governments, establish a genuine bicameral legislature, and increasingly make the EU's institutions themselves directly responsive and accountable to the people in the member states. The European Parliament (EP) has achieved much, yet for much of the time its role in reforming the EU has gone unacknowledged. Spinelli proclaimed in 1984 that parliaments were king-makers; they had a special and particular role to play vis-à-vis executives. The EP has moved from being a weak, consultative assembly to being one of the movers and shakers of European integration. It now faces perhaps its greatest test in continuing to shape, deliver and sustain democratic practice.

As this book confirms, every EP election so far has been largely hijacked by national political parties peddling a national agenda that deprives the electorate of the opportunity to consider EU issues and which all too often masks national governments' ambivalence over declaring and effectively explaining and arguing their European policy priorities. Obviously, governments need tactically to retain a margin of manoeuvre and surprise in negotiations and bargaining with partners in the Council of Ministers. They may be disinclined to take MEPs even from government parties into their confidence: the EP's majority in co-decision may depart from their preferred position. However, there is some chance that the new provisions regarding the role of national parliaments may lead to the development of procedures, patterns of consultation and cooperation between elected representatives which lead to a more constructive discourse and presentation of issues to the electorate. If the EP and national parliaments can develop patterns that are mutually beneficial and reinforcing, then there may be some hope that the old, archaic view of rivalry between them will give way to dialogue designed to ensure that democratic discourse and practice are developed and sustained

at all levels in an interpenetrated web of democratic activity. Whether this might contribute to lessening the public trust deficit in politics remains to be seen, but overcoming this is a challenge common to MPs, MEPs and governments alike. Open governance is about open, tolerant, reasoned and reasonable communication both among those who represent and govern and those who are governed. The EP is the EU's guardian of political values entrenched in the original treaties whose realisation expresses itself both in the common commitment to sustainable peace among states and consensual, peaceful problem-solving by them. The European Community's and EU's fluid institutional and decision-making designs may be suboptimal and imperfect. Those of the Constitution have yet to be tested. But first they have to be explained, a task MEPs have already embraced.

This book is about the first direct elections in the newly enlarged EU. Part I begins with an overview of the context of these elections and reflections on the historical turning point characterised by the Convention on the Future of Europe. Short overviews of the elections in the member states are provided in Part II.

Were these elections really no more than mere second-order election repeats of those in the past? Or do they reflect an instrument of the constitutional force given to the implementation of constitutional norms and values central to the practice and sustainability of liberal democratic representative government and parliamentary democracy in the EU at a time when the existential *raison d'être* of the EU is open to challenge not just from within its borders (in the shape of the usual Eurosceptics and 'extremist' parties) but from external forces endangering global peace as well as more specifically the viability and security of the EU? The democratic beast in its EU manifestation is not only relatively young but it shoulders the expectations and aspirations of a small group of states in the world committed to democratic political practice, which is both a minority form of governance in the world and one that requires constant renewal and affirmation if it is to withstand extra-EU onslaught and enable the EU to contribute to global peace as the founding fathers of European integration envisaged over 50 years ago.

In Part II, the individual country studies reveal that in several member states, governments' nervousness over the public reception to the draft Constitution may have impelled some to allow European issues to be marginalised in the EP election campaigns, and others to step outside the fray to guard against vociferous anti-European and anti-Constitution elements diverting the campaign and process. For some, the question of whether or not to hold a referendum on the Constitution had yet to be settled. In this sense, in the UK for example, a low turnout was possibly preferable to a higher one that could be represented as a deep public antipathy to the EU in general and the Constitution in particular without a proper debate having taken place. Ensuring that such a proper debate occurs is a collective responsibility. Facilitating understanding of the Constitution's democratic intent epitomised

in its institutional, legal and procedural designs and acting as a communicator and forum at all levels of governance falls to MEPs, and not just the members of the Convention on the Future of Europe.

Struck by the low levels of turnout in most member states, the incoming Commission has indicated its intention to ensure that Europe is better communicated, and to ensure that citizens are able to participate. However, this is not really the Commission's role. Governments, parliaments and parties especially are responsible for explaining what they do, when, why and how. Parties now are but one forum for mobilising citizens and persuading them to use their franchise. Mediated governance is the norm: political information is mediated through many public, private, state, extra-state, extra-territorial and individual voices, both legitimate and accountable, illegitimate and destructive.

In an environment of multidimensional and multilevel policy-making, MEPs face the challenge of requiring collective responsibility for sustaining democracy and connecting supranational politics with the people to overcome the lazy, comfortable assumptions that democracy is ever-present and ubiquitous across the EU; that uniformity exists in its conceptualisation, realisation and practice; that it does not require an effort on the part of all citizens to make their political preferences explicit in peaceful, democratically validated and accountable ways. Governments, parliaments and parties committed to democratic institutions, procedures, problem-solving and practices need to show that democracy matters and that it cannot be sustained in the absence of democratic participation exemplified by democratic elections. Mediated governance may open myriad information sources to people interested in and able to access them. It also exacerbates inequalities, trust and democratic deficits. Political mediation offers a constitutionally embedded, accountable and responsible route to reducing them. MEPs provide the human face to democratic governance and are in a position to explain 'Europe' to the people.

The question for the next EU elections is therefore not simply one of ensuring voters are informed about the EU and EP. Information – even a surfeit of interesting information – will not be enough to persuade people to vote. Rather, there is a need to show that democratic governance remains one of the most benign and inclusive forms of government – from local to supranational level – and that it depends on the participation of the people and the credibility of their legitimate and publicly accountable institutions to deliver good government. The plethora of other forums for participation neither make redundant nor absolve traditional institutions of parliamentary and democratic practice from the need to affirm the legitimacy and accountability of government. The vehicles of participation and communication may expedite the transmission of information but by themselves are far from adequate or sufficient vehicles of democratic governance, let alone efficient channels of ensuring accountability of policy-makers. Accountability itself is

increasingly slippery. Democracy has to be revitalised. Generations fought to deliver it: ever-evolving European integration has contributed to sustaining it. The European Parliament was and remains its custodian and champion, and the supranational institution that through its accountability to the people needs to give them confidence in the European design.

### **Notes**

1. J. Pinder (ed.) *Foundations of Democracy in the European Union: From the Genesis of Parliamentary Democracy to the European Parliament* (London: Macmillan, 1999).
2. D. Martin, *An Ever Closer Union?* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1991); R. Corbett, *The Treaty of Maastricht: From Conception to Ratification* (London: Longman, 1994); J. Lodge (ed.) *The EEC in Search of a Future* (London: Macmillan, 1986).