

Working Group on European Integration

European Elections 1999: The European Parties should nominate their candidates for European Commission President

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On the basis of the Treaty of Amsterdam the elections to the European Parliament 1999 offer an opportunity to significantly enhance the democratic character of the European Union. One step in this direction would be for the European parties to nominate their preferred candidate for the Presidency of the European Commission well in advance of the European elections.

Under the Treaty of Amsterdam the roles of the Parliament and the President of the European Commission are strengthened: the latter is nominated and appointed subject to the European Parliament's approval; the other Members of the Commission cannot be nominated without her/his agreement; the Commission acts under her/his "political leadership"; moreover, s/he has considerable powers of discretion both in apportioning tasks within the Commission and in re-arranging these tasks.

The elections to the European Parliament in June 1999 constitute an opportunity to further raise the stature of the President of the Commission by means of increased democratic legitimation. This would be achieved if, for the first time in the history of European integration, the citizens of the Member States were also given an opportunity to vote indirectly for who is to become President of the Commission. To this end, the European parties should nominate their preferred candidate for Commission President well in advance of the 1999 election campaign. The candidate need not be or become a Member of the European Parliament, but should play an active part in all Member States in the election campaign of the party concerned.

Such a procedure would have several advantages:

- By having a President endowed with enhanced democratic legitimacy, the Commission's political weight would increase. This would strengthen its capacity for decision-making and action, and render a Union with a growing number of members more effective.
- The Commission would become more accountable to the European Parliament, which would mean more democracy.

- In parliamentary democracies, parties are expected to choose candidates according to their political preferences and political capacities, and to campaign for their election. This should apply equally at European level.
- A clear indication of the parties' willingness to shape policy would be given. This would lead to a European-wide debate about the substance of party manifestos and constitute a milestone towards a European political discourse.
- Since the terms of the European Parliament and the Commission's mandate (5 years) are almost identical, the impact on public opinion would be substantial. Not only would the election campaign become more political, but the perception, acceptance and legitimacy of both Parliament and Commission would be improved in the minds of citizens.
- The present unsatisfactory method of choosing the Commission's President would be replaced by a process where candidates would be judged by their ability to rally majorities behind convincing political programmes. Individual member state governments could no longer raise objections against candidates they might not like.

It is up to the two major European parties – the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Christian-Democrat/conservative European People's Party (EPP) – to put forward in early 1999 candidates for Commission President capable of obtaining support of both the European Parliament and the European Council.

Indeed, although aware that the appointment of the Commission President requires unanimity among the governments of Member States, they would not have much choice but to give their approval to a candidate who, after having successfully campaigned in the European elections, will have the backing of the majority of the European Parliament.