PARTY POLITICS VOL 9. No.2 pp. 201–218

 London ▪ Thousand Oaks ▪ New Delhi

TAMING LABOUR'S MEPs

William B. Messmer

ABSTRACT

The national party leaders of Europe, sitting in separate national parliaments from their party's Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), normally have difficulty influencing MEP policy decisions. This article, after pointing out the obstacles which minimize national party influence, analyzes a new and largely unacknowledged system of MEP coordination and control developed by the British Labour Party. Using data from interviews with Labour's MEPs, the article concludes that Labour's leaders have created an influential system of rewards and sanctions that have encouraged a closer and more disciplined relationship in this dual-parliamentary setting.

KEY WORDS ■ European Parliament ■ link system ■ MEPs ■ rewards and sanctions

In most of Europe's national parliaments, political party leaders maintain systematic, disciplined control over their party's parliamentary voting blocs. In contrast to this, the relationship between national party leaders and their party's Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) is considered to be weaker (Bardi, 1996: 102–5; Corbett et al., 1995: 90–2; Nugent, 1993: 59; Westlake, 1994: 132–45 and 237–44). Corbett (1998: 69) argues that MEPs vote in ways '. . . that demonstrate considerable independence from their national party line'. Raunio (2000: 221) similarly concludes, after a 1998 survey of national parties with MEP delegations, that 'Regarding legislative work, MEPs remain relatively independent of their national parties'. Further reflecting this view, Hix et al. (1999: 7–13) have created a theoretical model of forces influencing the legislative behavior of MEPs in which the party, far from being most important, is seen as only one of several possible influential factors.

Political party scholarship suggests that the process of building closer internal party relations between national leaders and MEPs will encounter two significant obstacles. Both are rooted in the institutional setting of the relationship. The first obstacle is a product of the 'dual-parliamentary'

1354-0688(200303)9:2;201–218;028139

setting of this relationship. Party leadership, sitting in national parliaments, does not readily control rewards and sanctions that effect the aspirations and careers of their MEPs sitting in a separate and independent European Parliament (EP). As a result, as Scarrow (1995: 7) has pointed out, '. . . the less that individual MEPs [are] rewarded by party leaders . . . the more likely they are to risk the displeasure of these leaders'. The second obstacle is the consensual tradition of the EP's decision-making processes. The EP is a multinational and multiparty body. As a result, there are no ready majorities in its deliberations, and the EP achieves such majorities through lengthy give-and-take among the many national and party delegations. As Hix and Lord (1997: 129–30) point out, even if national party leaders wish to influence this process, they must be wary, as outsiders, of upsetting these delicate negotiations with untimely and uncompromising interventions. Such action might limit MEP options and success '. . . by denying them the flexibility to negotiate their way into winning coalitions' (Hix and Lord, 1997: 129).

The evolving institutional context of the national party–MEP relationship, however, may be encouraging national party leaders to find ways of overcoming these obstacles. During the 1990s, the power of the EP in the EU policy process was strengthened substantially by the Maastricht (1993) and Amsterdam (1997) treaties. In many policy areas, the EP was given 'co-decision' powers with the EU's Council of Ministers, creating a bicameral EU policy process. As a result, national party leaders may now gain greater influence in the EU policy process if they can effectively control their party's MEPs. Further, especially if they are in government at the national level, national party leaders would not normally want their ministers negotiating policy in the Council only to find that their party's MEPs are supporting different or even opposing policy from their position in the EP. As Raunio (2000: 211) has pointed out, this changing institutional context has created an incentive for national parties to want to control their MEPs, and to overcome the obstacles that make a coordinated relationship difficult.

The governing Labour Party of the UK has acted on this incentive and fundamentally changed its relations with its MEPs. Between its election to power at Westminster in 1997 and the EP elections of 1999, the Labour government, with the cooperation of Labour MEP leaders, created a systematic relationship of policy coordination between themselves and their MEP delegation. Called the 'link system', this new relationship has brought MEPs into the highest levels of policy development and decision-making with the national party's front benches at Westminster. In exchange for this policy influence, however, this new system, when necessary, also provides the national party leadership with disciplined control of Labour MEPs' votes. It is the central argument here that this new system has been successful at minimizing the obstacles and creating much closer relations between the Labour Party and its MEPs.

Labour's case should be significant to scholars because it is an exception to the general picture of the limited MEP–national party leader relationship

that is found in the literature. The case suggests that national parties can be a much more important determinant of MEP legislative behavior than has been previously suggested. In making this case, I also present an analysis of how the Labour Party, in the context of the EP's consensus style of decision-making, created effective rewards and sanctions that made policy coordination and control possible. This analysis is accompanied by data on MEP attitudes about these aspects of the new system,[1] and the changed relations with the national party. Going beyond the focus of this study, the conclusion offers suggestions about the possible changing role of MEPs in national parties, and how this may effect voter perceptions of a 'remote' EU. Labour's link system is a largely unacknowledged innovation in the British and wider European political and scholarly picture. Virtually nothing has been written about it. But before this analysis of Labour's new system can start to fill this void, a discussion of the incentives and obstacles that have influenced this case will provide a necessary context.

Incentives and Obstacles

The fundamental incentive for any national party's desire for closer relations with its MEPs is the fact that the power of the EP has grown in the EU policy process. However, Labour's decision also reflects motivations which are particular to Labour, and that may not be present to the same degree in other parties. For 10 years, from 1989 to 1999, Labour's MEP delegation – or what has been formally titled the European Parliamentary Labour Party (EPLP) since 1991 – was the largest national party delegation in the EP. Its size meant the EPLP was given a strong leadership role in the Party of European Socialists (PES), which at that time was the largest party group in the EP, and nearly an EP majority by itself. This presented the opportunity for pronounced influence for Labour, through its EPLP. In fact, because of the potential legislative opportunities offered by such a large EPLP delegation, the EP began to be referred to in national Labour Party circles during the mid-1990s as 'the second front'.

A further incentive for development of a system of EPLP control, however, was the fact that little internal discipline existed within the EPLP. Often it would not work together as a disciplined group within the EP. Further, during the 1990s there were factions within the EPLP that would often not work with interested national party leaders. As a result, Labour's MEPs developed a reputation among some in the national party as 'second-rate' politicians, and undependable allies. While in opposition, Tony Blair, as well as party leaders before him, had bitter disagreements with the EPLP, and not only believed that it hurt Labour's influence in the EP, but also felt that it hurt the national party effort to regain power at Westminster (Anderson and Mann, 1997: 138–41; Messmer, 2000). As a result, Blair's leadership team believed that if the EPLP were to be useful to party efforts a system of coordination and control would have to be created. Thus, the taming of

Labour's sizeable delegation of MEPs was a precondition to their being of dependable use to the national party.

However, as the Labour Party's national and EPLP leadership began to consider ways to achieve closer coordination, they encountered two institutional obstacles to a closer relationship. The first was, as Scarrow (1995: 6–7) has indicated, that in their dual-parliamentary setting the control of national party leaders is limited because they have no effective rewards and sanctions over the EPLP behavior. Typically, within a single parliament or legislature, as Bowler et al. (1999: 5–14) argue, control over rewards such as promotion to ministerial or spokesperson positions and sanctions such as expulsion from the party and its whip (temporarily or permanently) are fundamental to leadership control of parliamentary voting blocs. Yet, such powers are possible to use only where all sit in the same single parliament from which such powers are derived. In their dual-parliamentary setting, Labour's MEPs are not able to be ministers in their national government, and national party leaders do not control access to the EP positions to which ambitious MEPs might aspire. To overcome this obstacle to national party control, the Labour Party needed the creative development of new types of rewards and sanctions to bridge the dual-parliamentary divide. It may push the point about the impact of dual-parliamentary settings on parties, but it is also the case that Canadian and US party scholars have long blamed the decentralized character of North American parties on their federal (dual-parliamentary) institutional settings (Dawson, 1949; Epstein, 1984; Katz and Kolodny, 1994).

Hix and Lord (1997: 86) indicate that the continental national parties overcome the dual-parliamentary setting and control their MEPs through the control of candidate selection and list rank-ordering processes of their proportional representation (PR) electoral systems. MEPs who wish to be reselected and rank-ordered in advantageous list positions, the argument goes, act in accord with national party wishes. Britain, with its single member constituency electoral system, where power over selection has been in the hands of local party officials, was an exception to this until it adopted proportional representation (discussed below) for the 1999 EP elections.

However, control through PR, without some accompanying rewards, is a crude and controversial instrument of party discipline. In democratic systems, voters and elected officials believe that legislators should have the right to occasional voting independence on matters of personal principle. In any case, with MEPs, candidate selection cannot be exercised sooner than every 5 years, and MEP political sins have to be egregious, and/or continual, to be acted on at the national level. Thus, effective systems of party control of legislators must go beyond the sanction of PR control alone. They need to be based on combined systems of rewards and sanctions, which are not readily provided in the dual-parliamentary setting of national parties and their MEPs.

The second obstacle to national party control is the consensus-style decision-making derived from the coalitional processes of the EP. National

party delegations in the EP, as Corbett et al. (1995) describe them, are only parts of any majority needed to pass legislation. Therefore, creating a majority on any legislative decision requires a consensus among the many national and party ideological interests found in the EP. Hix and Lord (1997: 129), in describing the consensus-finding process as one of 'package-dealing and horse-trading', argue that its impact has been to discourage uncompromising national party control of MEPs for fear of keeping them from being an influential part of winning coalitions. While the Labour Party was considering the development of its own system of EPLP control, Labour MEPs were quick to reflect Hix and Lord's argument by warning that attempts at close control would condemn them to the sidelines of this legislative process.

Thus, for the Labour Party to initiate disciplined control over the EPLP, it needed a flexible system of 'give-and-take' negotiating, unlike the command system of Westminster, that could accommodate the consensus-driven style of the EP. It also needed to provide the type of effective rewards and sanctions that encouraged ongoing loyalty and discipline across the dual-parliamentary divide. Finally, the system would also have to be effective enough to overcome the EPLP's own traditional culture of independence. These were imposing obstacles to national party control that would require special organizational steps to be taken if they were to be overcome.

The New System: Discipline in Exchange for Influence

Between 1997 and 1999, the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair, with strong support from the EPLP leadership, created a new set of organizational links, understandings and processes between its front benches at Westminster and the EPLP. On the eve of Labour's general election victory, in an internal party planning memorandum, the goal was enunciated of bringing together the efforts of the EPLP and Labour government ministries to 'ensure the overall coordination of Labour's European work' (David and Crawley, 1997: 1). The memorandum went further to suggest that the national party's front bench ministerial teams would bring in MEPs to be authoritative players, 'assisting ministers in their work' on European policy negotiations, in exchange for 'a reciprocal commitment from the EPLP [of] unqualified support to a Labour Government'. In other words, the MEPs agreed to disciplined support of the national party's front benches in exchange for ministerial policy influence.

Blair's government, along the lines outlined by the planning memorandum, created a formal organizational connection between its government ministries and Labour's MEPs. It called this new connection the 'link system' (www.eplp.org.uk). Under the link system, the EPLP's policy spokespersons are appointed to sit on the appropriate cabinet-level, ministerial team. The appointments are made by the ministry, in agreement with the EPLP. The

EPLP's policy spokespersons are the EPLP's specialists in their respective policy areas, and their policy recommendations to the EPLP are normally most influential in the delegation's consideration of its common final voting position. These spokespersons sit on the appropriate and powerful EP policy committees (there are 17 standing EP committees) that are responsible for drafting the legislative proposals on which the EP, itself, finally votes. The EPLP spokespersons also work within the PES, enunciating the EPLP's position in developing the common PES policy stance. Currently, not only are four of these EPLP spokespersons linked with Labour's government, they also serve as PES committee spokespersons in the same area. Thus, they also have the stature of being PES 'coordinators' on 4 of the 17 EP committees. Therefore, the link system connects the most authoritative EPLP policy specialists, some of whom are also PES policy authorities, with the ministries in London working in the same policy area.

The actual contacts between the ministry and the spokesperson, or what are now also called 'link MEPs', normally occur on a face-to-face basis, once or twice a month, for regularly scheduled ministerial meetings. Normally, the link MEP travels to London for these ministerial meetings, especially when European policy matters are under consideration, though occasional conference calls also serve as meeting venues. Individual ministers also travel to Brussels for Council meetings or other briefings. Consequently, meetings with the link MEP, or with the entire EPLP, can occur there as well. When circumstances require it, most link MEPs, of course, indicate that telephone, telefax and email contacts are much more frequent. In order to ensure MEP access to the ministry, each cabinet minister, or in most cases a designated minister of state, is responsible for link relations. Through this minister, the link MEP is provided with the necessary ongoing access to the ministry, and given help with the 'gate-keeping' obstacles which civil servants might erect. The link MEP and the EPLP offices provide similar access when ministers visit Brussels and the EP.

The link system has created a Labour Party 'team' approach to European policy, encompassing its MEPs and its front benches. This has created for the first time, as longer serving Labour MEPs are quick to point out, a feeling within the EPLP that it is a part of the larger national party and its agenda. But another systemic policy benefit has also emerged for Labour. In the EU policy cycle, the EP is required to have its first reading before the Council. Therefore, the EP normally takes up legislation several weeks in advance of the Council. As a result, through the link MEP, London's ministries are offered an early view of Commission proposals and EP committee perspectives. The ministry, therefore, with link MEP assistance, has a long lead time, not only to plan actions in the Council, but more importantly to use the link MEP to influence EP committee deliberations while positions are not hardened and details, or perhaps even the larger perspective, may be shifted. Thus, despite the dual-parliamentary setting, the link system is said by MEPs to provide a kind of policy 'early warning system',

which often enables MEPs and the UK government to avoid the embarrassment of supporting different policy positions.

The views of individual MEPs about the link system and its impact on the EPLP's relations with the government can be found in Table 1. The questions in this table offer insight into MEP attitudes about both the general opportunity of the EPLP to be heard in the government's policy development process, as well as perceptions about the EPLP's actual influence in fashioning policy. This sampling of the attitudes of 24 of Labour's 29 MEPs in the 1999–2004 EP supports the conclusion that, from their perspective, the link system has had a positive influence on the EPLP's relations with the government, and in providing it with an opportunity to be heard by the national party leadership. The overwhelmingly positive answers to question 1, about the effectiveness of the link system in enabling 'communication on EU policy', and the follow-up question 2, in which respondents were asked to name 'examples of policy communication', are strongly supportive of the above conclusion. Specific examples of MEP responses to question 2 included such EU foreign relations issues as: EU enlargement, trade exports, foreign development aid (Balkans and outside Europe) and depleted uranium use, as well as internal EU regulations and directives in the following wide variety of areas: employment, immigration, genetic modification, bond taxation, maritime safety, environment and transport. The actual influence of the EPLP in the government's European policy decisions is also apparent to a large majority (63 percent) of the MEPs. However, the eight 'uncertain' responses combined with the single 'no' are a significant minority (37 percent) who perceive that being heard is one thing, but that actual influence may be more difficult to achieve.

The extended consultation process encouraged by the link system provides the EPLP with the sense of effective communication and a degree of influence with the government (as Table 1 indicates). It also usually enables the creation of common ground on policy between the EPLP and the government, and with the PES. This is illustrated by the fact that the EPLP normally votes with the PES whip. The EPLP whip's office estimated that in the first 20 months of voting in the 1999–2004 term of the EP, the

Table 1. The link system and EPLP relations with the government

Questions	*Yes*	*Uncertain*	*No*
1. Has link system provided effective EPLP/ government communication on EU policy?	22 (92%)	2 (8%)	–
2. Respondent readily named examples of policy communication?	22 (96%)	2 (4%)	–
3. Has link system provided the EPLP with influence on the government's EU policy?	15 (63%)	8 (33%)	1 (4%)

Source: Personal interviews with 24 of Labour's 29 MEPs from September 2000 through March 2001.

EPLP had voted with the PES whip on more than 90 percent of all (roll call and show of hands) votes taken in the EP. A carefully recorded study by Corbett (2001) shows the EPLP voting with the PES with even greater frequency. Corbett's analysis of 9,620 EP votes during the 15-month period between May 2000 and July 2001 shows a separate vote by the EPLP on only 278 occasions. Thus, according to Corbett's study, the EPLP voted with the PES on 97.11 percent of all votes during that period.[2] As a result, the EPLP would seem to be a partner in good standing with the PES and its consensus finding negotiation process.

When the policy differences are important enough, however, the link system also has given the government ministries a strong voice in the voting of the EPLP. On such occasions, the ministry extends its voting 'advice' to the EPLP whip's office through the link MEP. For all practical purposes, this ministerial advice is a government whip, and Labour's MEPs refer to it almost entirely as such. After the government whip is delivered to the EPLP whip's office, there may be some last effort to find common ground, or the EPLP leadership may, if the issue and/or political stakes are high enough, attempt to have the government whip rescinded. However, such efforts notwithstanding, it is normal for the EPLP whip's office to issue its own separate voting instructions to the EPLP requiring Labour MEPs to vote as the government has requested. In the interest of long-term harmony, both the link spokesperson involved and the EPLP whip's office will notify the PES leadership of the intention not to honor the PES whip.

MEP attitudes about the government's role in its decisions can be seen in Table 2. Question 1 about government influence with the EPLP and question 2 about ministerial control and whipping of EPLP voting, with their respective 100 percent positive responses, leave little room for argument about the link system making the government an important force in the affairs of the EPLP. In the interviews, some MEPs did not question the new role of the government in their affairs. 'We are nominated by the national party and should reflect its views' was the comment of one MEP. Others lament the lost independence of their earlier days as an MEP. Whatever emotions MEPs may feel about the government's role in EPLP affairs, a large majority (79

Table 2. The link system and government influence with the EPLP

Questions	*Yes*	*Uncertain*	*No*
1. Has the link system provided the government with influence in the affairs of the EPLP?	24 (100%)	–	–
2. When it chooses, does the government whip the EPLP vote?	24 (100%)	–	–
3. Has greater government influence brought greater tension in working with the Party of European Socialists (PES) party group?	11 (46%)	8 (33%)	5 (21%)

Source: (same as Table I above).

percent) of those interviewed (based on combining the 'yes' and 'uncertain' responses to question 3) feel that the new relationship with the government has had an impact on the EPLP's role in the PES. This possible impact of the new system is further discussed below. But the presence of this perspective notwithstanding, all those interviewed agreed unanimously that a new system and controlling force has come into place.

The combined responses in Tables 1 and 2 offer strong support for the case that the link system has done well at overcoming the dual-parliamentary setting in which the Labour Party finds itself. However, the responses to question 3 in Table 2 suggest that a significant percentage of MEPs may have reservations about how well the link system is fitting into the EP's consensual decision-making process. However, the EPLP–PES relationship should be put into perspective. Discipline within all EP groups has been widely regarded as historically weak, and individual MEPs and all national delegations have sometimes chosen to vote independently of the PES (Corbett et al., 1995; Hix and Lord, 1997). As a result, within the PES, when national delegations occasionally do not vote with the rest of the group, they are expected to inform the PES whip in advance, but breaking the PES whip is accepted. These conditions, which condone the periodic breaking of the PES whip, have made it possible thus far for the EPLP to be a member of the PES, and yet also to function within the hierarchic and occasionally disciplined relations that accompany the link system. To date, there has been no indication or confirmation from any member of the EPLP, or its leadership, that the PES is seriously and formally raising the question of the EPLP's voting record and membership in the PES.

Further, on the issue of strains with the PES, there is also logic to the argument advanced by some in the EPLP, as well as in the literature (Hix and Lord, 1997: 150), that disciplined national delegations help to provide direction and coherence for the development of the larger PES policy positions. Other PES national delegations now know that the EPLP's positions are sometimes not only separately whipped, but also informed by close coordination with the UK ministries, with all of the resources which they bring to bear on policy questions. In fact, some national delegations have asked for copies of the EPLP's whips for their own voting on occasion. Nonetheless, the significant percentage of MEPs who have responded with uncertainty, or negatively, to question 3 above suggest that the EPLP–PES relationship should be carefully watched in the future.

The Carrots and Sticks Behind the Link System

During the 1997–9 period, when the Labour government and the EPLP were developing the link system, the EPLP organization was also being strengthened internally. The historically weak EPLP whip's office began consultations with the whips office in the House of Commons in order to

improve EPLP whipping procedures. The EPLP whip's office began to function not only as a means of communication about voting preferences, but also as the eyes and ears of the EPLP leadership in spotting and dealing with rebellious MEPs. Further, the EPLP's Standing Orders, which outlined (in 13 pages) the expectations and responsibilities of Labour MEPs toward the EPLP and the national party, were rewritten by the EPLP and approved by the NEC in September 1997 (Guidelines, 1997). Both of these improvements provided necessary administrative support for the functioning of the new link system which was being implemented during this period.

The whip is primarily a means of communication and information gathering, and the Standing Orders constitute a kind of contract between the EPLP and the national party outlining expectations of behavior. By themselves, however, neither can sufficiently ensure the type of behavior for which each asks. As pointed out above (Bowler et al., 1999), the control of parliamentary voting blocs requires party leadership's control of rewards and sanctions that are meaningful in the professional lives of those legislators being whipped. These 'carrots and sticks', as they are sometimes called, encourage the disciplined behavior that holds parliamentary voting blocs together. In 1997, at the beginning of its newly won term of government at Westminster, Labour's national party leaders controlled no desirable offices in the EP that could be used to reward supportive MEPs. Nor had it significant sanctions to apply to those MEPs who might continually refuse to support leadership attempts at vote mandating in the EP. Labour made two decisions in 1997 about this problem that would provide it with both carrots and sticks. The first was to make the responsibilities and treatment of link MEPs rewarding enough that they would not only help with policy coordination, but that they might also encourage loyalty to the new Labour government and adherence to the new coordination and control system with the EPLP. The second decision made by the national party leadership was to give itself a significant stick. It did this by moving to adopt the legislation necessary for a PR electoral system by the time of the 1999 EP elections. This would give the national party leadership, as opposed to the constituency party leaders of the existing system, the opportunity to control the MEP candidate selection process.

The Link Appointment as Carrot

The link-MEP position was planned and created by the Labour Party to be more than just a conduit between the EPLP and the government. Ministries are known for their resistance to unwanted outside influence. Back bench MPs, after all do not have ministerial access, and must send written inquiries to government ministers asking for help with their constituent problems. Further, as MEPs were well aware, their stature was not high in Westminster circles. Consequently, offering routine access and a ministerial team role via the link system was something special to offer MEPs.

The prestige of the initial link-MEP appointments in 1997 was further assured by the fact that it was made clear these appointments were approved by the Prime Minister's office. Two special link-MEP appointments at the Transport Ministry and the Foreign Office were made in May, 1997, within days of Labour's general election victory. These first link appointments were given the special title of European Parliamentary Private Secretary (EPPS). Six months later, based partly on the experience with these appointments, an additional list of link appointments was made public in November 1997. These, and all subsequent such appointees, have been called simply 'link MEPs'. The EPPS title has not been used because such a Westminster-derived title suggested that these MEPs were primarily creatures of the ministry rather than the EPLP. Nonetheless, little seems to have been lost without the title, and the impact of the initial appointments, with their prime ministerial imprimatur, was important for setting the positive tone of the EPLP reception of the link-MEP concept.

The attitudes of the link MEPs in the 1999–2004 EP continue to reflect this initial positive view by MEPs of the link role. It is not a system without some periodic problems, as most link MEPs will readily acknowledge. Ministries are not always listening or interested, and sometimes bureaucratic resistance to the concept is still encountered. However, as Table 3 illustrates, the overall reaction of the 15 link MEP respondents (out of the total of 20) reflects a positive perception of the link role among the link MEPs, and suggests that it is viewed as the 'reward' that it was intended to be.

Question 1 about feeling 'useful' to the ministry received an overwhelmingly positive response (93 percent) of the link MEPs interviewed. Question 2, about being a 'genuine' team member, was asked in order to probe further the sense of psychological closeness (or distance) to the ministry. The overall response is still positive, with a majority (53 percent) indicating they did feel they were a genuine ministerial team member. But, surprisingly, the negative and uncertain responses (a combined 47 percent) reflect not only the sense of dual-parliamentary separation and other problems mentioned above, but also responses that had little or nothing to do with the link process or the ministerial reception. Where the responses were negative or uncertain to this

Table 3. Link-MEP attitudes about the link system

Questions	*Yes*	*Uncertain*	*No*
1. Do you feel useful to the ministerial team?	14 (93%)	–	1 (7%)
2. Do you feel that you are a genuine member of the ministerial team?	8 (53%)	1 (7%)	6 (40%)
3. Do you have policy influence with the ministry?	11 (73%)	2 (13%)	2 (13%)
4. Do you like being a link MEP?	15 (100%)	–	–

Source: Personal interviews with 15 out of the EPLP's 20 link MEPs, from September 2000 to March 2001.

question, a subsequent question of 'why' brought the following wide-ranging responses: 'I don't have time', 'the minister's style doesn't encourage it among any of the junior ministers', 'not enough policy business (in my link area)', 'have not influenced minister's thinking yet', 'I can't visit London (my electoral region is too far away), and so its not possible to meet with the minister, face-to-face, enough'.

Questions 3, of Table 3, asks about the more utilitarian reaction of having 'policy influence with the ministry'. The 73 percent positive response says much about why link MEPs might feel their appointment is professionally important, and would encourage support for a disciplined relationship with the government. The 100 percent positive response rate to question 4, about whether they liked being link MEPs, is further supportive of this conclusion. A subsequent question about 'why' the role was liked brought the responses given in Table 4 and revealed the sense of 'reward' which these individual MEPs feel about their link roles.

Table 4. Individual link-MEP comments about their link role
(Each comment is from a different individual link MEP)

1. 'The exciting nature of being with government. I can call No. 10 and have access.'
2. 'MEP links are closer to ministers than to backbenchers in the PLP.'
3. 'I have my particular interests. I work closely with [the full name of the minister]. [the first name of the minister] and I work well together.'
4. 'It offers the opportunity for influence with the government.' 'It raises the EPLP's profile . . . its influence.'
5. 'I feel part of the Labour Government's effort, probably better than the PLP.' 'I see [full name of minister] regularly . . . [though] sometimes treated as the awkward cousin . . . I get to speak my piece.'
6. 'The link system is very critical to government/EPLP interaction.'
7. 'I have influence as link, [though I am] influential on some issues and not others.'
8. 'Gives political access at the highest government levels [with] input into government thinking and policy.' 'It also helps in reverse. It is a very important tool that stops people [MEPs] going off at tangents.'
9. 'I am close to the centers of power.'
10. 'The link system puts you on an equal basis with them!'
11. 'We were the forgotten army, and now I can't believe the access I have.'
12. 'It allows influence and access in policy areas that are important.'
13. 'Being a link is quite interesting. [name of the minister] is changing things, and you can contribute to policy.'
14. 'It gives me influence in a policy area that I am interested in.'
15. 'It is a very important communication procedure with the government ministers, and defines the EPLP position.'

Source: Taken from personal interviews with 15 individual link MEPs, from September 2000 to March 2001.

PR Candidate Selection as a Stick

The Labour Party's national leadership at Westminster also wanted a serious sanction, or 'stick', to accompany the new system of coordination and control. Being able to professionally threaten or punish MEPs if they would not accept the whip was important because the occasional effort by national leaders to ensure their vote in the past had often failed. It may also have been thought to be especially important for disciplined control of the EPLP because of Labour's 62 MEPs in 1997; 40 were in at least their second term of office (23 of these 40 were in their third or fourth terms) and accustomed to their independence from the national party.

To create a sanctioning mechanism, Labour announced in July 1997 that it would change the UK's EP electoral system in time for the 1999 EP elections. The new system chosen by the government was a 'closed list proportional representation' (CLPR) system. Some observers of the 1999 EP elections have only interpreted the new CLPR system as a move to please the UK's Liberal Democratic Party (Butler and Westlake, 2000). No doubt it achieved this, but it also gave Labour's national political organization control over the selection and list rank order of all of Labour's 1999 MEP candidates. In the event, it has been perceived by most of those current MEPs who went through the candidate selection and rank-ordering process (and were subsequently elected in 1999) that the process can be used against their reselection in the future should they refuse the EPLP whip too often.

The traditional single member system for electing MEPs in Britain, as mentioned above, was one that put the candidate selection power in the hands of Labour's Euro-constituency party, where MEPs had built up good personal contacts and support. It was not a system that readily allowed national leaders any special influence. In fact, most constituencies are sensitive to interference by the national party in what were thought to be local decisions. The new electoral system put into place in Britain for the 1999 EP elections (Northern Ireland had always had a form of PR for EP elections) created 11, large, multi-member, regions in which parties had to nominate a list, in rank order, of their candidates who would be elected from the list in proportion to the party's share of the regional vote. These regional lists of candidates, being predetermined by the political parties with no opportunity for voter changes to them, are therefore called 'closed lists'. The control of these regional closed lists, in Labour's case, was given to the National Executive Committee (NEC). This effectively ended the control of the Euro-constituency organizations over candidate selections, and put it in the hands of the national party machine.

There are several reasons for Labour's leaders, as well as Labour MEPs, believing that CLPR was a system that would encourage leadership control. Both learned from the experience and examples of their continental counterparts in the EP that troublesome MEPs could be deselected by the national parties (Hix and Lord, 1997: 84–90; Raunio, 2000: 218). The

belief that the candidate selection process used by Labour is, in fact, a mechanism by which to punish troublesome MEPs might also have come from the comments about CLPR of some of Labour's national leaders. For example, the Home Secretary, Jack Straw, who was responsible for handling the passage of the bill through parliament, defended the adoption of the 'closed list' type of proportional representation system precisely because it put political parties in a position to more carefully control candidate selection, and therefore their MEPs afterwards (*Financial Times*, 30 October 1997). Lord Whitty (1997), Blair's personal appointee responsible for the national party's coordination of European party affairs, and Wayne David (1997), the leader of the EPLP from 1994 to 1999, were both known to believe that the new candidate selection process could and should be used this way. Finally, David Gardner, the Assistant General Secretary of the Labour Party responsible in 1998 to the NEC for the candidate selection administration, said that the process would result in candidates '. . . who will sustain a Labour Government' (O'Neill, 1999).

These justifications for changing the electoral system, on top of the experiences of their continental colleagues, encouraged MEPs to believe that the candidate selection and rank-ordering process was a stick that would be held over their heads. Now in place, the new system is a topic that many MEPs are reluctant to discuss openly. Some would not discuss it, and others asked not to be quoted. From the remarks of 15 MEPs willing to go on record, it is clear that all unquestionably believed the CLPR system was used to remind MEPs that they must represent their national party (see Table 5).

It should be noted here, also, that an unfavorable reaction of ordinary Labour Party members to the control of CLPR lists by the national party organization has sparked discussion by Labour's NEC of a new candidate selection and rank-ordering system for the 2004 EP elections. It is anticipated, though not yet announced, that a party committee will nominate (or not) sitting MEPs for inclusion at the top of regional lists. Party members will then select new candidates to be added to the bottom of the list, and via a final one-member-one-vote ballot will rank-order the top and bottom of the final lists. The impact of such a system is uncertain, but the fact that re-nomination of sitting MEPs is not automatic may serve to remind them, at least in a general way, that they remain creatures of the national party.

Conclusions

The introduction of the link system, and the rewards and sanctions on which it is based, will require further analysis over time to see if it remains effective at bringing coordination and control between the EPLP and the national party leadership. The tables of data and commentary, above, suggest that the system is off to a good start. Further, since the beginning of the present EP in 1999, no major disagreements have erupted between the EPLP and

Table 5. MEP comments about the CLPR electoral system
(Each comment is from a different individual MEP)

1. 'PR was used to get rid of those who would not take leadership direction.'
2. 'PR has made it difficult [for individual MEPs] to connect to the party grassroots.'
3. 'The MEPs are more responsible to the party now, due to PR, and not to their constituents.'
4. '[Because of PR] the national party–EPLP relationship is not one of equals.'
5. 'Behind the ministerial whip we have this little thing called PR.'
6. 'PR gives the national party control. The implicit threat is always there. [MEPs] do think very carefully now.'
7. 'Voters expect you to follow party policy, coming from a party list.'
8. '[PR] destroyed relations with local party organizations, [and] could effect MEPs sense of security about returning.'
9. 'The PR selection mechanism is in leadership's hands and MEPs are aware of it.'
10. 'PR is a means of control.'
11. 'PR had a great role in making the EPLP aware that it was a part of the national party.'
12. 'The impact of PR is that it allows control through the candidate selection and ranking process.'
13. 'PR makes you answerable to the party, not the voters.'
14. 'The impact of PR is that the government–EPLP dialogue is no longer one of equals.'
15. 'Our relationship with the national party is now one of command and control.'

Source: Personal interviews with 15 of Labour's 29 MEPs, from September 2000 to March 2001.

the government. This is not to say that there have been no problems. Directives on working time for medical personnel, the use of depleted uranium munitions, and health and safety issues, have created disagreements. But the number of MEPs who have refused the whip on these issues has not been large, nor are the same MEPs always involved. In short, the link system seems to have enabled the Labour Party to follow the EP policy development process and bring greater national party coordination and control of the EPLP. This also suggests that the Labour leadership is in a better position to have influence in the wider EP and EU policy process. While further study of policy outcomes will have to be undertaken to see if this relationship has actually delivered the desired policy, it may also prove interesting to be sensitive to the link system's impact on both the national party and the EP.

An unintended implication of the link system's introduction has to do with the internal political balance of the Labour Party on European issues. If the link system has made the MEPs an important resource for the Labour Party, it may have substantially encouraged a process already underway of creating a new set of influential players within the party. In this case the new

players are a set of 'European' Labour politicians. That they are 'European' politicians does not at all mean they are all federalists. They are not. But they all believe that Europe offers important opportunities for solving some of Britain's, and Europe's, problems. They will influence Labour to accept this point of view and to see Britain's future potential as fundamentally in Europe. Well before the link system, MEPs helped personally to shift former party leader Neil Kinnock toward a more positive position on European integration (Corbett, 1998: 74–5). In 1990–1, MEPs helped shift the NEC toward a more open position on European monetary union (Hix and Lord, 1997: 71–3). After 1991 Labour's MEPs were formally integrated into the wide array of various national party policy development venues, with the likelihood of significant influence occurring. MEPs, as part of Labour's leadership electoral college, will continue to make Europe an issue on which future Labour leadership candidates are vetted. This will make it difficult for an anti-European party leader, or even a disinterested one, to be elected. Further, this infiltration of the Labour Party by its MEPs goes far beyond lobbying the national party leadership. Recent Labour Annual Conferences have seen a considerable increase in MEP speeches and fringe group sponsorship and activity related to a wide set of European issues (Corbett, 1998: 75–6). Thus, the EPLP would seem to be involved in a substantial grassroots lobbying exercise within the party as well. The new link system can only further enhance this process.

Another implication suggested by this study is that the link system, particularly if emulated by other parties, may further weaken political party integration at the European level. Both Bardi (1996: 100) and Raunio (2000: 221) argue effectively that increased national party attention to their MEPs works against unity in EP party groups and weakens further development at the extra-parliamentary, transnational party level. The reactions of some of Labour's MEPs offer further support for this possibility. More work on the changing relationship between the EPLP, with its link system, and the PES could produce a more definitive answer to this question. It is an important question because, in the bicameral EU policy process that is emerging, the EP is often seen as the body that is more 'European' in orientation. With greater attention being paid by the national parties to their MEPs, this could change.

Finally, if the link system becomes more widely understood in Britain, and if it is successful at influencing policy outcomes, it may make the EU in general, and the EP and MEPs in particular, less remote and easier to see as important in the lives of citizens. Political parties serve as a legitimizing link between Britain's citizens and their institutions of power at Westminster. The parties are understood by voters as the means by which they may influence those institutions. The link system clearly connects the known quantity of one of Britain's major parties to the MEPs, and the EP and its decisions. If the political importance of party MEPs, as a result of the link system, becomes more apparent to voters, then it may help to reduce the

remoteness and confusion about the EP and EU. Party manifestos and EP elections might receive more attention than they do at present. The passing of time and further work on the wider impact of the link system might provide useful answers to whether this is happening.

In conclusion, the Labour Party is a pro-European party, and the MEPs have contributed to this stance by further helping to ensure that Labour remains open to the possibilities in Europe. Additionally, in the setting of the EP, the link system may also be intensifying the sense of the 'national', at the expense of the 'European'. For those who fear this latter result, it might be seen as a reasonable price to pay if it helps to overcome the EU's remoteness in the perceptions of citizens.

Notes

1 The personal interviews on which this study is based have taken place with many MEPs, MPs, as well as party and government staff, going back several years to 1994. The information used in the tables, however, was specifically taken from a series of interviews conducted with 24 of Labour's 29 MEPs during the period September 2000 to March 2001. These 24 MEP interviews were lengthy, individual discussions, and included subset groups of (1) the EPLP's four elected leaders, as well as (2) 15 of the 20 policy spokespersons/link MEPs. All notes are retained by the author.

2 I thank Richard Corbett for sharing this, as yet, unpublished EPLP voting study with me. His analysis missed only 6 voting sessions of the 15-month period he studied – three Strasbourg Friday sessions, when few controversial bills are considered, two Strasbourg Monday sessions, when few votes of any kind are called, and one Brussels session. The study included every vote (roll call, show of hands, amendments, etc.) during this period when the PES issued a whip, as well as the EPLP's separate whips.

References

Anderson, Paul and Nyta Mann (1997) *Safety First*. London: Granta Books.

Bardi, Luciano (1996) 'Transnational Trends in European Parties and the 1994 Elections of the European Parliament', *Party Politics* 2: 99–114.

Bowler, Shaun, David M. Farrell and Richard S. Katz (1999) 'Party Cohesion, Party Discipline, and Parliaments', in Shaun Bowler, David M. Farrell and Richard S. Katz (eds) *Party Discipline and Parliamentary Government*, pp. 3–22. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.

Bowler, Shaun and David M. Farrell (1999) 'Parties and Party Discipline within the European Parliament: A Norms-Based Approach', in Shaun Bowler, David M. Farrell and Richard S. Katz (eds) *Party Discipline and Parliamentary Government*, pp. 208–22. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.

Butler, David and Martin Westlake (2000) *British Politics and European Elections 1999*. London: Macmillan.

Corbett, Richard (1998) *The European Parliament's Role in Closer European Integration*. London: Macmillan.
Corbett, Richard, Francis Jacobs and Michael Shackleton (1995) *The European Parliament*, 3rd edn. London: Cartermill.
Dawson, Robert M. (1949) *The Government of Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
David, Wayne. Leader EPLP, 1994–8. Personal Interview, Brighton, England, October 1997.
David, Wayne and Christine Crawley (1997) *A Labour Government and the EPLP* (Labour/EPLP Planning Memorandum).
Epstein, Leon (1984) *Political Parties in the American Mold*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
Financial Times (1997) October 30.
Guidelines: Relations Between Government Ministers and Labour MEPs (1997) Labour/EPLP Document.
Hix, Simon and Christopher Lord (1997) *Political Parties and the European Union*. New York: St. Martins.
Hix, Simon, Tapio Raunio and Roger Scully (1999) 'An Institutional Theory of Behavior in the European Parliament'. www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/eprg
Katz, Richard S. and Robin Kolodny (1994) 'Party Organization as an Empty Vessel: Parties in American Politics', in Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair (eds) *How Parties Are Organized*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Messmer, William (2000) 'PR and Taming Labour's MEPs', Mimeo, Drew University.
Nugent, Neill (1993) 'The European Dimension', in Andrew Gamble et al. (eds) *Developments in British Politics – 4*. New York: St. Martins.
O'Neill, Norman (1999) 'Closed Lists and the European Elections', *Renewal* 2: 73–84.
Raunio, Tapio (2000) 'Losing Independence or Finally Gaining Recognition?', *Party Politics* 2: 211–23.
Scarrow, Susan (1995) 'European Tension in Britain's Political Parties', *British Politics Group Newsletter*, Spring: 6–8.
Standing Orders: EPLP (1997) Labour/EPLP Document.
Westlake, Martin (1994) *Britain's Emerging Euro-Elite?* Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing.
Whitty, Lord. General Secretary Labour Party, 1983–94. Minister-in-Waiting, 1997–8. Personal Interview, London, March 1997. www.eplp.org.uk

---

WILLIAM B. MESSMER is Professor of Political Science and Co-Director of the European Studies Program at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, USA. A member of the American Political Science Association and the British Politics Group, he is the author of articles about political parties and foreign and security policy in such journals as *Foreign Policy*, *The Round Table* and *Studies in Comparative International Development*. He has been studying the influence of European integration on Britain's political parties since 1994.
ADDRESS: Department of Political Science, Drew University, Madison, NJ 07940; USA. [email: wmessmer@drew.edu]

Paper submitted 11 October 2001; accepted for publication 31 January 2002.