

Julie Smith

# Liberal Parti



AS THE UK was negotiating its departure from the European Union, one Liberal voice appeared frequently on the British media: the European Parliament's Brexit coordinator, former Belgian prime minister, Guy Verhofstadt. He was invited to speak because of the parliament's role in approving any withdrawal agreement, but his parallel role as leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe in the European Parliament (EP) was undoubtedly significant to his thinking about the future of the European Union. Yet for a British audience, Liberal Democrats included, Verhofstadt's language and clear Euro-federalism served only to highlight the differences between the most committed pro-Europeans in the EU27 and attitudes in

the United Kingdom, even of Europhile Liberal Democrats.

The Liberal Democrats have long been portrayed as the most pro-European party in British politics, and indeed the early conversion of the Liberals to the European cause (see Wallace elsewhere in this volume) and their impassioned calls for an 'exit from Brexit' after the 2016 referendum on EU membership might make this portrayal wholly appropriate. Yet for many years their pro-Europeanism remained muted as the party's campaign strategists believed it was unlikely to win votes by espousing pro-European policies. Thus, while the Liberals and later Liberal Democrats were signed up to the manifestos of the European Liberal 'family' for every set of European

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Parliamentary elections from 1979 onwards, the discourse in the UK was typically less enthusiastic than in many other European Liberal parties. With notable individual exceptions such as Andrew Duff, the most pro-European British party fell far short of the federalist zeal of some of its European sister parties. What appear pro-European positions in the UK may appear subdued and even intergovernmental in EU terms. Meanwhile, so-called 'like-minded' parties within the Liberal family could seem anything but like-minded to those on the left of the Liberal Democrats.

So, what brings European Liberal parties together if their views appear so different? What do they have in common and what do they seek to achieve? The aim of this article is to outline the development of relations between Liberal parties in Europe since the creation of the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952. It looks at the factors that led parties which sometimes seem radically different to join forces and remain within the Liberal family, while noting the fragmentary nature of European-level party cooperation, where alliances have often shifted around the time of the five-yearly elections to the European Parliament, as shown by the ever-changing titles used to denote Liberals and their allies at European level.<sup>1</sup> It argues that some parties have sought to link up with Liberal parties (or indeed leave the Liberal family) less for reasons of ideology than as a result of the sheer practical understanding that larger groupings have more influence within the European Parliament.

## Origins of European integration and of Liberal cooperation

The European communities established in the 1950s, which paved the way for what we now know as the European Union, were created by predominantly Christian Democrat politicians in office throughout the six founding member states. Yet, if European integration was a Christian Democrat initiative, European Liberals were favourably inclined. Indeed, the logic of peaceful

cooperation so powerfully advocated by Robert Schumann in his eponymous Declaration of May 1950 fitted well with the ideals that had underpinned the creation of the Liberal International just a few years earlier.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the prospects for Liberal parties were rather limited in Europe in the middle of the twentieth century as centrists of right and left sought to take on a Liberal mantle while parties of the far right and far left continued to threaten Liberal values which had been so deeply challenged in the early years of century.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while Liberals have been in office at various times since the end of the Second World War, they were rarely key governing parties in West European countries in the early years of European integration.

The establishment in 1953 of the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community in Strasbourg saw the appointment of the first European parliamentarians. At that time, members of the Common Assembly were all members of their respective national parliaments, 'double-hatted' to represent their constituents in their national parliaments and to represent the 'peoples of Europe' in the Assembly. Government ministers meanwhile would represent the member states in the Council of Ministers (and from 1974 in the European Council, which brought together presidents and prime ministers), as the dual legitimisation of Europe was established. The nature of party politics in the founding member states was such that only three party 'families' were present in the early days of the Assembly: Christian Democrats, Socialists/Social Democrats and Liberals, although the Socialists were often rather reluctant Europeans in the early years. (Other parliamentary parties did exist in certain states, but they were either too small or too extreme to be allowed to send delegates to an Assembly whose membership consisted largely of MPs who were already supportive of the embryonic integration process.)<sup>4</sup>

The symbolism of representing the people was not lost on the Liberal MPs taking their seats in European forums. When the Common Assembly met for the first time in 1953, the Liberal delegates opted to sit with fellow Liberal parliamentarians

The European Parliament chamber in Strasbourg

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from other countries in a 'Liberals and Allies Group' rather than congregate on national lines: politics 'beyond the nation state' had begun. Yet, while symbolic representation may have started in the 1950s, it was wholly divorced from any electoral dimension at the European level. Moreover, even though the MPs quickly identified like-minded colleagues in the 1950s, questions about what constitutes a 'Liberal' party in Europe were, and remain, contested as the integration process evolved from the ECSC to include both the Atomic Energy and the Economic communities, before becoming the European Union (EU) in 1993, and membership expanded from just six member states in the 1950s to twenty-eight when Croatia joined in 2013.

### Who are our sister parties?

The show of unity that began in the early 1950s masked considerable disagreements then as now. The term 'Liberal' is never sufficient to indicate a convergence of views. As Emil Kirchner has put it: 'no clear definition has emerged as to what Liberalism is or what Liberal ideology consists of.'<sup>5</sup> Where social democrats might refer to a coherent set of values and principles, this cannot be universally assumed of Liberals for whom there is no guiding canonical text, such as *On Liberty*, to which the Liberal Democrats look but others may not. The works of Friedrich Hayek might give a more apposite rendering of the views of some continental Liberals.

Liberal parties in Europe cover a large swathe of the political spectrum, so finding common cause on policy matters has not always been easy. Broadly speaking, they are divided into social liberals and economic liberals, although the labels only partially explain the different attitudes and policy preferences of those who call themselves Liberal. On economic matters there are marked differences between those who adopt a more interventionist approach to policy and the economic liberals who sit firmly on the right of the spectrum. Where the Liberal Democrats are broadly conceived as being on the centre-left of British politics, some of their sister parties are clearly on the right, reflecting economic liberal origins. Such divisions are reflected in several states by the creation of more than one Liberal party – sometimes both or all within the ELDR/ALDE family – thanks in part to electoral systems that are more conducive than the British first-past-the-post system to the emergence of new parties. For example in the Netherlands there exists the economic liberal VVD of Prime Minister Mark Rutte and the social liberal 'D66'; there are similar divisions in Denmark between Venstre and Radikale Venstre.<sup>6</sup>

Nor did all the parties that would seek to cooperate with the Liberals always see themselves as Liberal. Hence moves to create a party federation ahead of the first European Parliament saw

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the establishment of the Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties of the European Community (ELD), a title that explicitly acknowledged the hybrid nature of the grouping. These disparities were rendered even more apparent over the years as the ELD became the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR), and even more so with the creation in 2012 of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE).<sup>7</sup> The fact that the Liberals were seated to the right of the European People's Party in the European Parliament hemicycle gives a graphic indication of where the party families were seen to fall on the political spectrum, even though the views of several parties would place them more clearly on the centre-left alongside the Liberal Democrats.

The differences that characterised the Liberal 'family' at the outset of integration would only become greater as the European Union expanded geographically, notably to countries that had been behind the Iron Curtain until thirty years ago. Repeated enlargements of the communities/union brought in countries with little experience of Liberalism and, in the cases of the most recent enlargements, rather transient parties and fluid party systems. Those new democracies frequently saw the emergence of so-called Liberal parties which materialised and declined with considerable rapidity, having few real roots. A country with three Liberal parties one day might soon find itself with none, raising questions about which parties to accept and how long they would last. Yet, despite the shaky foundations, the newcomers strengthened the Liberal family. As Graham Watson noted, four of the countries that joined the EU in 2004 proposed Liberals as their nominees for the European Commission.<sup>8</sup> By 2018, leaders of Liberal parties were the second most numerous in the European Council, with eight compared to the nine EPP prime ministers, a remarkable presence given the challenges facing Liberalism in Europe – a far cry from the early years of integration. Moreover, several of Europe's Liberal prime ministers came from Central and East European countries (the Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovenia) at the time of writing, an extraordinary situation given the rise of 'illiberal democracy' in so much of that region. Moreover, the vagaries of national politics also saw a more unusual new member join ALDE in 2009: Ireland's Fianna Fail. Not previously seen as Liberal, it might in some ways have been more comfortable in the European People's Party had its rival Fine Gael not already become a member.

### The electoral imperative

The Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community had very few powers and its appointed members met only infrequently. As the ECSC was joined by the Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) and the Economic Community (EEC) in 1958, the Common Assembly

was expanded and renamed the European Parliamentary Assembly. Its members were still appointed from national parliaments and its role remained limited to being 'consulted' on European legislation and having the ability to kick out the European Commission, albeit with no commensurate rights to a say in composition of the new Commission. However, the member states always intended that the European Parliament should be directly elected. As progress was made towards holding such elections in the 1970s, Liberal parties in Europe, like the Christian and Social Democrats, looked at ways of creating an electoral vehicle for the proposed elections. Thus, in March 1976, the Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties in the European Community (ELD) was established. As the name implied, this was not a party as conventionally understood. Rather, it was an umbrella organisation that brought together Liberal parties from across the communities, as well as other parties that felt themselves to have more in common with the Liberals than with either of the other main party families, in a confederal structure.<sup>9</sup>

When the first direct elections to the European Parliament were held in June 1979, the ELD had a common manifesto, agreed by the constituent parties. As with the European People's Party representing the federalist Christian Democrats and the Confederation of European Socialists (later to become the Party of European Socialists), the manifesto was a lowest common denominator document, being the product of negotiation among member parties – a phenomenon that would persist forty years on. And if national parties acted as the gatekeepers preventing meaningful moves to create a genuinely transnational party, two other factors played a key role as well: finance and the ongoing draw of the 'national' for voters and media, just as much as for political parties.

The creation of party federations was a natural corollary of direct elections, but these new organisations were very poorly resourced, dependent in part on financial support from their group in the European Parliament until such funding was banned, and from the outset groups were not permitted to use group funding to support election campaigns, making transnational electioneering very difficult. In contrast to the extra-parliamentary party federations, party groups in the European Parliament were well funded, with financial support, as well as speaking times in the plenary and places on EP committees all being granted according to the size of the groups. There was thus always a strong incentive to have a larger, potentially more diverse group prior to direct elections. The logic remained unchanged in the elected Parliament – money and influence followed the size of the group and it was therefore important to maximise electoral support in European Parliamentary elections. Yet, the membership of the groups in the European Parliament was

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only partially related to the outcome of the elections, since parties could join and leave groups, whether or not they had campaigned on the grouping's transnational manifesto.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the elections were essentially a series of national second-order elections, with the focus of attention – such as there was – on national leaders and domestic issues rather than European.<sup>11</sup> Few of the voters would have considered they were voting for ELDR rather than the Liberal party in their own country.

That the elections were fragmented was in large part a result of the electoral systems in place. The MEPs' pragmatic resolution to the question of the appropriate electoral system, which had so vexed the drafters of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, was to decree that there should be common principles for the electoral rules, but each member state was permitted to determine its own system. Thus, in the first set of elections the UK opted for a first-past-the-post system in accordance with the rules of national elections. The upshot was that the Liberals lost the two MEPs they had had prior to the elections. It would take until 1994 and the fourth set of direct elections before this lack of representation would be rectified. So egregious was it seen to be that during the 1992 British presidency of the European Council, leader of the ELDR group and French MEP Yves Galland placed twelve UK flags on his desk to represent the Liberal MEPs he argued were missing because of the electoral system.<sup>12</sup> While Graham Watson and Robin Teverson managed to break through on the old system, it was not until a change in the rules at EU level that Liberal Democrat voters would be more accurately represented in the European Parliament. From 1999, all member states have been required to use some form of proportional representation – albeit not the same form across the Union. The regional-list system adopted by the UK under the New Labour government enabled Liberal Democrats to secure representatives across Britain from 1999 until 2014, when the electoral arithmetic saw a decline to a single MEP.<sup>13</sup>

It is not only the Liberal Democrats who have found it difficult to secure representation in the European Parliament. The German Free Democrats (FDP), for decades the 'king-maker' in German politics – frequently a strong ally of the Liberal Democrats, but at times on opposite sides of policy debates – also failed to see any MEPs elected between 1994 and 2004. The lack of Liberal representatives from two of the largest member states was for many years compounded by a lack of Liberals in France and Spain. While historically there were Liberals in France, indeed there were three French parties in ELD when it was founded, they were a relatively small force in European politics. Nor were all those French MEPs in ELDR necessarily Liberals as conventionally conceived. One such grouping were the *Giscardiens* of former President Valéry Giscard

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d'Estaing. That their membership was pragmatic rather than arising from ideological impulses became clear when in 1991 Giscard sought to take the whole ELDR parliamentary group into the European People's Party where he believed he would have more influence.<sup>14</sup> Liberals were very clear that they had little in common with the Christian Democrats and rejected their proposal out of hand. Yet, movements of parties in and out of the party groups in the European Parliament and in and out of the wider European parties has been a feature of politics within the EU. Thus, for example, the rather oddly named Portuguese Social Democrats left the Liberals for the EPP in 1994. The reasons for such moves were often about joining a larger group that benefited from greater resources and administrative support, something the EPP pushed strongly while Helmut Kohl was German chancellor and Klaus Welle the secretary general of the EPP. The upshot of such moves was a larger group in the European Parliament but one that was ideologically less coherent, ultimately sending some European federalists towards the Liberals, as they believed the EPP has lost its federalist zeal, as discussed below.

### Creating a European Liberal Party

Over the years, two forces altered the nature of party politics at EU level: the prospect of treaty reform (the 1993 Maastricht Treaty on European Union) and the collapse of communism in Europe would make party fragmentation clear and yet paradoxically increase the incentives for closer cooperation. Maastricht increased the powers of the European Parliament but changes in the decision-making procedures typically required absolute majorities of MEPs, ensuring that party cohesion and cooperation with other mainstream groupings remained important.

Changes in EU treaties saw the idea of 'political parties at European level' enter the lexicon, with a strong endorsement of their role in European level-democracy (an innovation in the Maastricht Treaty). As a reflection of this change, in December 1993, member parties of the ELDR council voted to create the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR). Now a party in name, yet still lacking the infrastructure and resources enjoyed by the group in the European Parliament, the creation of the ELDR Party reflected the broader ambition to establish parties at the European level, although the impact of this was not obvious to ordinary citizens, who continued to vote predominantly along national lines just as they had done in the first elections held in 1979. Nonetheless, the dynamics of party politics did develop in the European Union, even if citizens seemed oblivious to the changes.

When the European Parliament created a budget line for European-level political parties following the creation of a Party Statute in 2004,

there was finally an opportunity for more Liberal party activity. From that point, 85 per cent of funding from EU-level political parties could come from the relevant European Parliament budget line.<sup>15</sup> This was enhanced by the creation of a Liberal party think tank, the European Liberal Foundation (ELF). Both initiatives ensured that there was funding for Liberal member parties to engage in EU-related activities. Yet changes in the legal framework of cooperation and even the provision of funding did little to create a strong sense of a genuinely European-level party, rather than a federation of national Liberal parties. The preparations for European Parliament elections might include drafting a manifesto, but it remained the product of competing national preferences. Drafting teams could be appointed, but the final say on the content would come down to the representatives of the constituent member parties, supporting their preferred policies. The upshot was that the ELDR/ALDE manifestos, like those of the other main party families, remained anodyne, lowest-common denominator documents, many years after the first European Parliament elections were held.

So anodyne have transnational party manifestos been over the years that at times it was hard to tell them apart. One issue that has marked the parties out is their attitudes towards further European integration. The EPP originally declared itself to have a 'federal vocation'. Yet as that party grouping expanded in line with Kohl and Welle's quest to be the largest group in the EPP, its federalist nature was watered down. (Indeed, how could it not be with the British Conservatives sitting as 'allied members' from 1992 until 2009?) Some of the more federalist French and Italian MEPs left the EPP and created a new federalist EU party, the European Democratic Party – like ELDR and the EPP a formally constituted 'Party at EU level'. EDP MEPs shared the more federalist views of ELDR but were not willing to join the Liberal party. Thus, a new European Parliament group, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, was established in 2004, bringing together federalists from the EDP and ELDR in the third largest European Parliament group.

At the time of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections, the EDP and ELDR parties were still formally separate. By 2012, however, the EDP had withered and the ELDR Party resolved formally to rename itself the ALDE party. By the time Europe's citizens headed to the polls in 2014, the elections looked set to be different – finally, after years of discussion among politicians and academics, the Lisbon Treaty had paved the way for the appointment of the Commission president. Thus ALDE, like the other main EU-level parties, nominated its candidate for the Commission presidency in the event of securing the largest number of seats in the European Parliament. Initially, it looked set to be a race between ALDE leader in the European Parliament, Guy Verhofstadt, and

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William Wallace, 'How the Liberal Party Became Committed to European Union', in this issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*.

the Finnish European Commissioner Olli Rehn. Rehn then pulled out leaving a choice of Verhofstadt or no one, and Verhofstadt was duly chosen by ALDE delegates. There was concern about the nomination among the Liberal Democrat leadership, however, anxious that Verhofstadt's presence in the election campaigns might remind the Eurosceptic British press of the federal dreams espoused at least in some parts of Europe. Little attention was paid to the Spitzenkandidat process in the UK, as Labour had similar reservations about Martin Schulz as the Socialist candidate and the Conservatives' departure from the EPP ensured that Jean-Claude Juncker was not their candidate – a point that was all too apparent in David Cameron's opposition to his nomination as Commission president. While the UK's lack of engagement with the Spitzenkandidat process might have been extreme, it was scarcely unique: with the exception of Germany and Luxembourg, there was little coverage of the new process.

If EU-level politics have yet to gain traction at the electoral level, parties at the EU level do matter in other ways. They serve as forums for discussion among member parties, at Congresses and other sectoral meetings, and can enable politicians to get to know their colleagues from sister parties in a way that can be useful when they hold office nationally and thus attend the Council of Ministers or the European Council. In particular, eve-of-summit meetings are an important opportunity for prime ministers to coordinate ahead of the meetings. Thus, ahead of the March 2018 European Council meeting that accepted the Commission's proposal for the Brexit transition deal, eight Liberal prime ministers met, along with five Liberal Commissioners. Liberal Democrat leader Vince Cable was also present and secured the support of his Liberal counterparts for the party's position that there should be a referendum on the eventual Brexit deal. Such support was immediately reported to the press, although there was some confusion as to whether there was formal agreement on this position. What was clear was a statement from long-term Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, that the UK would be welcome to remain in the EU should it change its mind. International support for a member party was thus visible and caught the attention

of the national media, highlighting the role of the transnational ALDE party.

Turning to the future, as the EU looks to the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, work is already in hand for an ALDE manifesto. Liberal Democrats have been consulted on manifesto – anyone on the ALDE email list would have received an email soliciting their views in February 2018 and asserting 'Together, we can build the best Liberal manifesto ever!' Yet, while Liberal Democrats' views are being sought like those of any other ALDE members, the expectation was that by the time of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections the United Kingdom would have left the European Union. The timing of its departure was indeed favoured by other Europeans as marking a clean break at the end of one parliament (2014–19) and ahead of the selection of the next set of key EU positions – Commission president, president of the European Council and High Representative on Foreign Policy being the most significant. ALDE has member parties from non-EU countries; the Liberal Democrats can undoubtedly remain part of ALDE and indeed, the ability to network with other Liberals across Europe will be crucial for keeping close ties to the EU as the UK relinquishes its place in the various EU institutions, but the nature of the Liberal Democrats' role in ALDE will inevitably change. Indeed, it already has: the recommendation at the 2017 Annual Congress in Amsterdam was that Liberal Democrats should not vote on the future of the seventy-three seats in the European Parliament that would be vacant in the event of the UK's departure from the EU. Brexit will not only affect the UK and EU institutions, it will also affect EU-level political parties.

*Julie Smith is Director of the European Centre in the POLIS Department of Cambridge University and Lib Dem Spokesperson on European Issues in the House of Lords. Her most recent book, The UK's Journeys into and out of the EU: Destinations Unknown (Routledge, 2017) will be available in paperback in May.*

- 1 Over the years, Liberals in the European Parliament and later in the transnational European party federation and then party were joined by radicals and others who felt uncomfortable with the name 'Liberal', leading to the naming and renaming of the European Liberal Democrats and Reformists to the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, with several other titles along the way.
- 2 See Smith, *A Sense of Liberty*.
- 3 See inter alia Watson, *Building a Liberal Europe*, p. 1.
- 4 In France, for example, both the Communists and Gaullists were represented in the national parliament, yet neither was deemed 'coalitionable' and hence not sent to Strasbourg.
- 5 Emil Kirchner (ed.), *Liberal Parties in Western Europe* (CUP, 1988), p. 2, cited by Smith, 'Between Ideology and Pragmatism', p. 109

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# The 1918 coupon election and its consequences

In November 1918, just 24 hours after the Armistice had been signed with Germany, the Liberal Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, announced his decision to hold a general election.

Selected Coalition candidates received a signed letter of endorsement from Lloyd George and the Conservative leader, Bonar Law. The 1918 election thus became known as the 'coupon' election.

The election saw 133 Coalition Liberals returned to the House of Commons, but the independent Liberals, whom Lloyd George had abandoned, were reduced to a tiny minority, overtaken by the new Labour Party, while the Coalition Liberals increasingly became the prisoner of their Conservative Coalition partners.

One hundred years after the coupon election, this meeting will discuss Lloyd George's actions, the results of the general election and its implications for the Liberal Party and for British politics.

Speakers will include **Lord Kenneth Morgan** (author of numerous books on Lloyd George), and others to be announced. Chair: **Lord Wallace of Saltaire** .

**6.30pm, Monday 2 July**

Committee Room 4A, House of Lords, London SW1 (please allow at least 20 minutes to pass through security)

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- 6 During the coalition, there were some differences of opinion among Liberal Democrats about which were 'the like-minded' parties', with the party leadership meaning the right-wing German Free Democrats (FDP), the Dutch Liberal VVD and the Danish Venstre party while many on the International Relations Committee and elsewhere in the Liberal Democrats identified with the social liberal D66 of the Netherlands and Radikale Venstre of Denmark.
- 7 The name changed several times over the years with some parties reluctant to be called Liberals and while 'Democrats' worked for some, the somewhat different 'Reform/ists' was needed to placate others, albeit that those parties seeing themselves as Reformists were typically those that broke away again.
- 8 Watson 2010, p. 101.
- 9 At that time the Greens were not a force in European politics.
- 10 Parties that have campaigned as part of an EU-level party are normally expected to sit with the associated group if elected, but they can always leave. Equally, parties that had not campaigned on a transnational manifesto might subsequent decide they wish to join a particular group, whether associated with a transnational party or not.
- 11 The term coined by Karl-Heinz Reif after the first European Parliament elections remained apposite almost forty years later despite endeavours to create a European dimension in the elections.
- 12 See Watson, *Building a Liberal Europe*, p. 11.
- 13 It is frequently suggested that Labour adopted the regional list system to ensure that calls for PR in the UK would be diminished.
- 14 See Watson, *Building a Liberal Europe*, pp. 9–10 for a detailed discussion of this episode.
- 15 Source: European Parliament website, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/faq/6/political-parties-and-political-foundations-at-european-level>, last accessed 16 April 2018.