



[Comment] Party like it's 2009

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - An intrepid group of Danish pro-European campaigners want to know why they can't join European political parties. As reported in these pages earlier this week, Søren Winther Lundby, Sophie Nielsen and Steen Gade have written to the European-level coordination of each of three groups – the Socialists, the Liberals and the Greens – applying to become individual members.

Now, while I am a great supporter of the idea of European-level politics and also of European-level political parties, I don't think this is the right way of going about it.

Political parties form because a group of people share a political idea and can advance that idea better by being organised and united. They don't form simply because of the idea. European political parties are a great idea, but they need to find a job to do.

Right now, in Brussels, they are doing the job rather well. During the day-to-day work in the European Parliament, when MEPs debate and vote on legislation, there is actually quite a strong and growing degree of party coherence: a leading authority, Simon Hix, describes it as "comparatively high and growing levels of voting cohesion between the EP parties" The voting instructions agreed in the groups tend to be followed fairly faithfully. A

nd when it came to the vote last December on the Commission work programme for 2006, there was a neat party split in Parliament: the centre right was in favour, the centre left against. It's not in Brussels that the problem lies.

The challenge facing European political parties is to make themselves relevant outside Brussels, in the day-to-day political work of party members and activists throughout Europe; not at Brussels level but nationally, regionally and locally.

That challenge is not going to be met by a two-tier membership system – European and national – but rather by showing that European issues are not different from those that concern people most in their daily lives, but that they are the same. The job that MEPs do in Brussels has a direct relevance to every household in every street throughout our continent. Europe belongs not only on the TV but also on the doorstep.

What are the things that people care about most? Education: there's the ERASMUS scheme, enabling thousands of young people to study abroad. For health care, there is the essential European cooperation in monitoring the spread of bird flu, in case it should start to spread across borders again. And on road safety, the EU is bringing in new rules to ensure that children are properly protected in the back seat of the family car.

It may need a conscious effort to bring the European dimension into everyday politics, but it is important to do so. It will boost public support for the EU and the things it does, a task which needs all the help it can get right now, and it will have a second benefit, too.

This is because the European Parliament elections in 2009 present an opportunity to increase voter involvement in the EU in a dramatic way. The party groups fighting those elections will have the opportunity to nominate candidates for president of the Commission in the same way that they agree their election manifestos. If they decide to do so, they will give the voters more say in deciding the future leadership of the EU, and they will literally give a face to the choices facing Europeans in the future.

But the parties will only be able to take this step at European level if they feel strong and are

valued amongst their members throughout Europe. European political parties need to be built locally and nationally, not only in Brussels. This will take time to achieve.

The test of European political parties is not now, but in 2009. Will they be ready?

The author is director of Federal Union

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