

Them and Us

Standing in the airport on the way home from the European Parliament at Strasbourg recently I found myself next to a man in a flash waistcoat and smoking a big cigar, who let off a long, slow fart. The body belonged to the former minister for Northern Ireland, Roy Mason, who'd been wandering around the European Parliament with a leading tobacco company. This degenerate little incident is an index not only of men's notorious habit of noisy farting, but of something more important: big corporations take the European Community seriously, they think it is worth canvassing members of the European Parliament. Most of the Left in Britain wouldn't think it worth the time or money.

Mason's visit was connected with something that ought to make us change our mind: the attempts by Scottish MEP Ken Collins and the Euro-Parliament's important environment committee to take 1% of the price paid to tobacco producers through the Common Agricultural Policy and give it to the cancer programme.

How can the traditional anti-market stance of the Left help us understand, not to mention support, such a move? We are still stuck in the slogans of the EC referendum in 1975. Labour Party headquarters and Neil Kinnock have over the past couple of years been quietly re-thinking the EC. Since 1983 the party's policy has shifted from outright opposition to withdrawal as a last option. On a more practical front, working parties are developing between the Labour Party and the German SPD, who these days enjoy a close relationship with the Italian Communist Party.

But this rethinking has barely touched the British Labour Group (BLG) in Strasbourg. Socialist and communist members of the European Parliament remain frustrated and impatient at

the absence of the British Labour Group and the British Left from the attempt to build a European Left.

Isolation from our continental comrades, and ignorance about the mysterious ways of the EC have produced a virtual silence within the British Left about the debates now surrounding the EC's political metamorphosis: the European Communities (Amendment) Bill now making its way through the House of Commons will legislate for the Single European Act adopted by the EC earlier this year. It is not only designed to end restrictions on the movement of people, goods and capital within the 12 member states by 1992, but to give greater powers to the European Parliament and to give the EC the power to intervene in some terms and conditions of employment, foreign policy and the environment.

All the average person knows about the EC derives from some successful Thatcherite table-banging over the cost of Britain's contribution and about food mountains. And yet parts of the Left in Europe, sometimes in alliance with Christian Democrats and Liberals, are trying to match the promotion of the 'single market' with a social strategy.

Some of the most stringent challenges to Thatcherism's employment strategy and Britain's role as a big polluter have come from Europe. Where does that put our traditional opposition to the EC? Hedy d'Ancoma, former Dutch social affairs minister, now an MEP, is worried that the attitude of the BLG leaves the European field to the Tories. The British government 'use the anti-European attitude in the population to withhold things which are important for working people.'

The British Tories have fought hard against social regulation of the market, and many continental Europeans see the Tories and their deregulation strategy as a major threat in the EC. The Italian Independent, Vera Squarzialupi, who is on the Communist Party list, feels,

like many others, that this makes it vital to establish an effective alliance with the BLG. 'But', she adds, 'it is difficult to talk with them on European problems. The SPD and PCI are convinced Europeanists and the BLG are not, we study problems in a European dimension: it is a Europe of capital so we must build a Europe of workers. Nations have no reason to exist any more.'

Heinke Salisch, a member of the SPD group, reminds us that it is the British government which is blocking progressive directives on the environment, on women and the labour market, 'and I'm sure the German government is happy about this. What we can do in this parliament is make sure the people know. I'm opposed to the British Left's attitude. The community is widening. You have to participate in the debate around a new philosophy of the Left in Europe. The BLG is not taking part in that discussion. They're still playing naughty boys and girls. Sometimes you'd like to shake them and say "think!"'

Until recently, the Campaign Group has been the dominant force for 'rejectionism' within the BLG and Richard Balfe, one of the MEPs on the Left, admits that 'the Campaign Group within the BLG has found it difficult to work within the framework of the European socialist group.'

Probably the sole survivor of the Campaign Group's absolute opposition to the EC is Les Huckfield, who no longer even seems to take himself very seriously. 'Nothing that happens here is of the slightest importance for the poor devils I represent,' he said. He's got no time for the rest of the socialist group - the biggest single group in the parliament - 'there's only half a dozen you can talk to,' and anyway, 'the power lies in the picket lines and the demos,' he says.

The Flemish socialist Marijke von Hemeldonk, while admiring the British MEPs' rugged roots in their constituencies is depressed by the spectacle of 'people making a

lot of noise in corridors but not in committee. During the miners' strike British MEPs were collecting money, but they weren't there when the economic committee was discussing a report from the coal committee and they didn't intervene in the budget. This is bad behaviour.'

Bad behaviour sometimes extends to nationalist contempt for other nationalities as if the trouble with Europe is that it is full of foreigners.

Ken Collins reckons that 'much of what has passed for left-wing policy on Europe has just been nationalism masquerading.' But already some MEPs on the Left feel that the BLG ought to come clean about the need to change the emphasis and tone of the Left's interventions. Stan Newens asks himself, 'how can I be for a nuclear-free Europe and not come here and talk about it?'

Carole Tongue, who is busy on the women's committee and also in establishing trade union links between workers in her East London constituency and trade unionists across Europe, says 'things don't stand still, and the party hasn't evolved its ideas while the EC has been evolving. The European Right is using the worst aspects of the Treaty of Rome. Capital is organised at the international level, but where has the labour movement been at the European level?'

She adds: 'The environment is the paradigm, the nuclear cloud knows no borders, pollution renders national sovereignty obsolete. Knee-jerk anti-marketeters are fighting the wrong battle because the Right are in there shaping the agenda. We should use the European Community for our networks. The structures of the EC aren't right, the Treaty of Rome isn't right, but the level is right.'

We need a major new debate on the British Left about the EC, not just in the quiet corridors of Walworth Road, but among all of us, and not just about what we used to think, but about what we need to do now.

Beatrix Campbell

