

All Change For Europe

Voters in the European Community last elected a European Parliament in 1984. It was a very different political world from today. Five years ago in France and West Germany, the political initiative lay with right-wing parties which advanced at the expense of disoriented social-democratic opponents. In Britain, there was a swing to Labour and the Liberal-SDP Alliance which weakened the Conservatives. And in Italy, the death of Enrico Berlinguer produced an ultimately misleading surge of emotional support for the Communist Party.

Today, the situation in each of these main countries of the EC is very different. The result is expected to be a substantial shift in the balance of power in the parliament to be elected by citizens of the 12 member states on June 15 and 18. According to one assessment, as many as 150 out of 518 MEPs will be defeated, in what is generally being paraded as a shift towards the Left, towards European integration and the programme associated with the European Commission President Jacques Delors. As the European Parliament is now armed with greater power to intervene in Community policy formation, this change could ultimately be of more than academic importance.

For the first time since the parliament became directly-elected, unifying pan-European themes have become an important feature of the campaigns in many countries. The principal stimulus for this trend is the prospect of the Single Market in 1993 (these elections are the last before that change). But, especially on the Left, the Delors plan has also served to create a more unified agenda than before.

This is reflected in the common European Socialist manifesto, signed even by

the Labour Party. But it can also be seen in the integrated campaign of the green parties of Europe and in such quixotic but important gestures as David Steel's nomination by a coalition of Italian centre parties. Notably, the political sector where cross-border political co-operation is conspicuously least-advanced is on the Right. Mrs Thatcher's increasing isolationism is both cause and effect of this weakness.

The unifying trends are significant, but they are still mainly embryonic and it is important not to exaggerate them. With very few exceptions, most voters are likely to vote strictly on national political issues, and in each country the campaign is being treated as an interim verdict on domestic political parties.

Nowhere is this more importantly the case than in Germany, where the argument within Nato over short-range nuclear modernisation has come to a head because of recent provincial successes for the Social Democrats and Greens. Germany faces a decisive general election in late 1990, for which the June poll is seen on all sides as a primary.

Elsewhere, local preoccupations are even more prominent. In France, for instance, the Left's prospective gains are entirely related to the immense divisions which have opened up during the spring within the French Right, not to any particular controversy about Europe. In Holland, the vote comes just in advance of the autumn general election, caused by the failure of the centre-right coalition to agree a funding programme for new environmental measures. In Greece, it actually coincides with a general election. In Italy, it is being treated as a test of whether the Socialists are able to



overtake the Communists as the main force on the Left. In Britain, interest will centre on whether the policy review is helping Labour to unite an anti-Conservative electorate.

Nevertheless, the British election will have its own particular importance which does not deserve to pass unnoticed. For the first time, voters in this country are faced with a Labour Party unequivocally committed to the British presence in Europe. Although Labour has reserved its position on two issues - the power of the

European Parliament and the harmonisation of VAT - it has been an enthusiastic participant in the drafting of the common Socialist manifesto.

It is ironic, however, that just as Labour goes European, almost the last bastion of traditional nationalist anti-EECism is to be found among the Labour group of MEPs, many of whom are leftover figures from an earlier political era, protected from deselection only by bureaucratic inertia.

At the same time, following last September's Bruges



speech, Mrs Thatcher is increasingly distancing the Conservatives from their no less traditional pro-European stance. It is a reversal which is causing *frissons* in all parties. Though it may have relatively little impact in June in an election where British turnout is unlikely to rise above 30% (approximately half the figure in other countries), Europe could become a catalytic factor in the realignment of British politics in advance of the 1991 general election. •

Martin Kettle