Chapter Thirteen

The EPP’s Relationship to the Group in the European Parliament

The relationship of the party to the Group in the European Parliament (EP) has been central to the founding and development of the European People’s Party (EPP). For a long time, the party heavily depended on the Group with regard to both resources and exposure: there was no party outside the Group. Changes at various levels have altered this situation. Parties and groups now behave in a much more ‘adult’ way. They need to work together, particularly prior to and during EP elections, but some tension between them will continue to exist.

Looking for a Balance

In most parliamentary democracies with active political parties there is invariably a palpable antagonism between the parties and their parliamentary groups. How charged such tension becomes depends on a variety of factors, including the personalities involved and the political situation of the parliamentary group – whether the party is in power or opposition. The overall institutional picture and the political culture are both relevant as well. Normally, a strong parliamentary group will have a strong party behind it, since the group is an expression of the party, and the party will be, by the same token, to a large extent shaped by the group.

A parallel tension exists between parties and their groups at European level, but in this case the shoe is very much on the foot of the parliamentary groups. Matters remain as they have from the beginning: European parties play no role at all in choosing candidates for the European elections. As long as the right to vote in European elections remains a national right, it will be the preserve of national parties in the Member States to pick the candidates and organise the campaigns. The organisational weakness of the European parties also needs to be taken into account. Until their legal position in the Union was resolved, as happened only recently, they remained financially dependent on their component parties. Such dependence was not in itself problematic, since the European parties are ultimately made up of national parties. But given the national parties’ notorious reluctance to make available the finances necessary for effective work by the European parties, there was only one solution to their funding problem.

This solution was to turn to the groups in the EP. And these – both out of self-interest and because they share the same European mission – are invariably more sympathetic and willing to support the European parties. At an early stage, when the national parties scarcely recognised the need to do so, European parliamentary groups made available the resources and structures necessary to take the first steps towards uniting the parties as single organisations. The contribution of the parliamentary groups, both financial and otherwise, was from the start considerably greater than that of individual member parties – that is, until the Court of Auditors raised objections.

The special role of parliamentary groups in, and in relation to, the European parties is also a function of history. From the outset, parliamentary groups brought together political figures with the requisite knowledge of how Europe worked. These were the people who convinced party leaders at home of the importance of closer cooperation with partners in neighbouring countries. And it was they who took the initiative to establish European parties. Those parties were, in the first instance, the offspring of the parliamentary groups of the EP, which meant that from the start, the groups had a strong influence on their progeny. As co-founders, the parliamentary groups are also – in addition to the member parties – constituent members of the European parties. One effect of this is the powerful role reserved for the groups and their representatives in the party statutes.

Indeed, the origins and development of the EPP cannot fully be understood without taking into account its Group in the EP. The leadership of