Chapter Six

The Congress

The Role of the Congress

The European People’s Party (EPP) Congress is the highlight of the party’s activities. Held at least once every three years, in different venues, it is the forum for agreeing on the political line or programme, for deciding about changes to the statutes and for introducing the party’s leadership and members to one another. The agenda is normally centred on the adoption of a general political manifesto, either pertaining to an upcoming election or dealing with a more specific policy area, and is sometimes accompanied by internal elections.

The Congress is made up of delegates from the member parties, from the recognised associations (for youth, students, women, workers, local and regional politicians, and small and medium enterprises), members of the EPP Group in the European Parliament (EP) who belong to the member parties, the EPP Presidency as a whole, national heads of party and government, and European Commissioners who belong to a member party. The number of delegates is weighted according to the EPP’s share of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), individual delegates being elected by the appropriate body in the member party. Member parties set their own rules for delegate selection.

The Congress follows rules of procedure that are decided on and occasionally amended by the Political Assembly (formerly, the Political Bureau). Until the 1986 Congress in The Hague, the content of Congress documents was finalised in advance by a consensus at the executive levels. This was done to take account of minority opinions, and with an eye to maintaining unity. During the Congress, delegates could discuss the documents, propose footnotes and deliver commentaries, but they were not al-
lowed to make any changes to the documents themselves. Since the 1988 Luxembourg Congress, all changes or additions to Congress documents have been made by majority vote of that body. This includes changes and additions to a Congress document prepared by a programme commission, but amendments must be proposed before an announced deadline.

The Congress meets in plenary and also in a number of working groups, usually two. Both the plenary and the working groups are permitted to make decisions. The working groups are intended to reflect the composition of the Congress, and the delegations’ votes count for half the number of votes they hold in the Congress plenary. Proposals which in the working groups are supported by fewer than a third of delegates present will be rejected; those supported by a two-thirds majority will be accepted. Those that fail to achieve a two-thirds majority, but are approved by more than a third of the delegates present, will – after a position has been recommended by the programme petitions committee – be presented to the plenary of the Congress for decision. A final decision is taken by simple majority.

A new quality of cooperation and integration emerged when this voting procedure, made possible by a growing policy consensus and, in particular, the increased ability of delegates to understand each other’s points of view, was put into place at the end of the 1980s. It should be kept in mind that the principal problem for international or supranational understanding in a federation of like-minded parties is not that individual national elements hold differing interests or ideas and quarrel. The main problem lies, rather, in the different languages, cultures and constitutional backgrounds of the various countries from which partners and colleagues come. They bring with them different ways of speaking and behaving. Styles of debate and rhetoric vary from country to country. To those who are inexperienced, everything seems alien, making understanding, let alone trust, more difficult. The skill of the interpreters does not change this. The use of interpreters enables people to understand each other, but – with more languages and language combinations leading to longer translation processes – it also reduces spontaneity. In this way, compared with a national party congress, a European party congress is less lively. The problem is very difficult to overcome.

Since its founding in 1976, the EPP has organised almost 20 Congresses, most of which have not been held in Brussels. Some took place in the run-up to EP elections; others have had a longer time frame and dealt