

## Book review

***Wreckers or Builders? A History of Labour MEPs 1979-1999*, by A. Pollack (London, John Harper Publishing, 2009, ISBN 9780955620294); xix+337pp., £20.00 pb.**

Accepted version published in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49/2 (2011), p. 491

In a field dominated by state-centric studies of the Labour's European woes, Pollack's monograph is a welcome addition to the historiography. She poses the central question of whether, during a period when the European Parliament (EP) grew in power and stature, Labour's burgeoning cohort of MEPs – directly elected since 1979 – wrecked the European project or helped to build it.

By way of answer, the monograph is divided into four parts. The first sees Labour debate whether even to contest the first elections. They did yet apathy ensued, the public and media were uninterested, and Labour won just 17 of the 81 seats available. Once elected MEPs suffered from low pay, a lack of kudos domestically, and continental colleagues who were 'astonished' (p.28) with their combative parliamentary style. Nevertheless, there were signs of positive engagement on issues such as welfare and employment, the point made by Pollack that the EP became a platform to attack Thatcherism and provided a voice Labour lacked domestically. Neil Kinnock's leadership brought a more nuanced European policy and greater success in the EP, with a doubling of MEPs in the 1984 election. This forms the basis of part two. Members were beginning to cement their presence in the chamber, sponsoring resolutions and chairing committees. Still the traditional divides remained and the leadership of the British Labour Group was to change hands four times in as many years, the first casualty being the Barbara Castle. The elections of 1989 marked a sea change. For the first time Labour gained more seats than the Conservatives – 45 compared to 32 – and part three is devoted to explaining the role played by the new blood. Pollack argues Labour took a front seat in the legislative process, utilising the EP's increasing powers and directing responses to a number of events including German reunification, the Gulf War and the Treaty of Maastricht. By part four, Labour's 62-newly elected MEPs are shown as self-confident builders of Europe. They attracted attention from business lobbyists, felt secure enough to challenge Tony Blair over what eventually became the Amsterdam Treaty, and reacted angrily to changes in the MEP selection process.

All this indicates just how adventurous an undertaking Pollack's work is. She cleverly utilises contacts – having worked for Castle and been an MEP herself – to include an impressive number of interviews. Yet major limits do exist. All too often it reads like a diary, rendering a potentially dramatic tale an unnecessarily descriptive one. Its verbosity and repetitiveness exacerbate this and at times renders it little more than a who's who of Labour parliamentarians. Still, its originality is its strength, and this reviewer for one hopes Pollack returns to examine the period from 1999 to the present day.