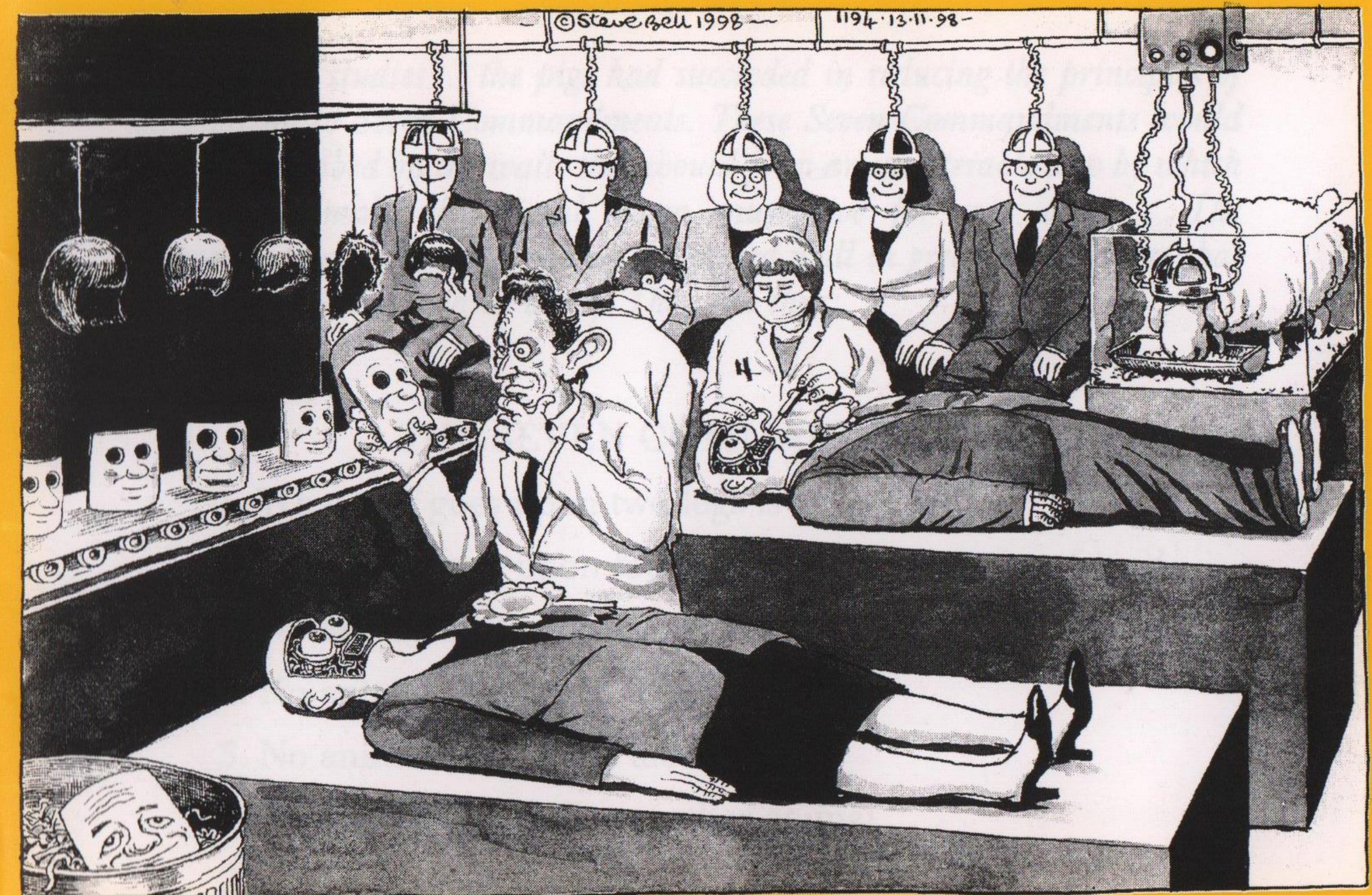


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New Labour New Democracy

Ken Coates MEP
and others



Leader All
~~One Member, One Vote~~^s

Independent Labour Network

ILN Pamphlet No.2
ISBN: 0 85124 618 4



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"If we cannot actually trust ordinary Labour Party members with decision making within the Labour Party, how on earth are we going to go out and try to win support for the Labour Party in the broader community?"

Tony Blair *defending the principle of one member one vote.*

"...by their studies... the pigs had succeeded in reducing the principles of Animalism to Seven Commandments. These Seven Commandments would now be inscribed on the wall; they would form an unalterable law by which all the animals of Animal Farm must live for ever after... The Commandments were written on the tarred wall in great white letters that could be read thirty yards away. They ran thus:

THE SEVEN COMMANDMENTS

1. Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy.
2. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend.
3. No animal shall wear clothes.
4. No animal shall sleep in a bed.
5. No animal shall drink alcohol.
6. No animal shall kill any other animal.
7. All animals are equal.

George Orwell: *Animal Farm*

Printed by the Russell Press Ltd. Tel: (0115) 978 4505.

Published in November 1998 by Spokesman for the Independent Labour Network,
Bertrand Russell House, Gamble Street, Nottingham, NG7 4ET.

Tel: (0115) 9708318. Fax: (0115) 942 0433.

www.iln.labournet.org.uk/

New Labour New Democracy

Ken Coates

*Ken Coates is the Independent Labour MEP
for Nottinghamshire North and Chesterfield*

Introducing the European Parliamentary Elections Bill which will "reform" the system of voting in the European Elections of June 1999, the Home Secretary, Jack Straw, began his speech by saying:

"The Government were elected in May with firm commitments to improve the democratic process in this country."

Only George Orwell could do justice to the advance in democracy which that Bill has registered. Constituencies will be totally abolished, so that no elected Member will be responsible to any discrete body of electors. The country will be divided into electoral districts which match the government's own economic regions. The smallest region will elect four Members of the European Parliament, and the largest, eleven. Middle sized districts will elect six or seven. It will not be possible to subdivide such districts, apportioning responsibility for a particular area to a particular Member because the voting will be for region-wide lists. Voters will choose either the Labour list, or the Liberal list, or the Conservatives, or whoever else: but they will not have the right to support particular individual candidates, whose names will figure on the ballot paper in the preferred order of the Parties themselves. According to the Party division of the votes, candidates will be declared elected in the order which the Parties have chosen. This means that those drawing up the Party lists will have decided not merely who will be offered for election, but who will actually be declared "elected".

In such circumstances, it is perfectly imaginable that all the successful candidates of three or four Parties might come from one particular district, or indeed might originate outside the electoral

region for which they have been chosen, altogether. In this way, the region-wide vote will produce region-wide Members, accountable to no-one in particular among the voters, but rigidly beholden to the Party bosses who appointed them.

If you wish to lobby your MEP, you will either have to write to all the MEPs for your region, in the hope that one might deign to answer, or more probably, you will write to the Political Party of your choice, and ask them to assign the problem you wish to raise to whichever particular Member has a particular interest in it. This gives Political Parties a markedly more active role in the process of representation than they have ever had before, down-grading Parliamentarians in the process. Electors might be forgiven for regarding this as a less than satisfactory way to process their grievances.

Those who have spoken in favour of the abolition of Constituencies argue that this problem does not matter, because so many of the issues dealt with in the European Parliament concern the regions, and that MEPs will be able to liaise with regional institutions.

If we really were about to experience an improvement in the democratic process in this country, we might expect, then, urgent attention to the establishment of democratic regional assemblies throughout Britain. But this reform is on nobody's agenda. What we shall have instead is a series of regional quangos, business-led, with a varying but attenuated participation by officials chosen from Local Government. Members of the European Parliament who relate to such quangos will find them rather imperfect exponents of the people's needs.

But if they wish to relate to elected Local Authorities, then they will meet, once again, the intransigent problem of demarcation. Will all MEPs liaise with all units of Local Government in the new super-regions? Or will they try to divide the responsibility between them? In which case, how can allocation take place across Party boundaries, when Party boundaries have been the sole criterion in the choice of elected Members?

The same problem will apply when voluntary organisations or

trade unions seek redress from their elected members. There will only be one clear channel of responsibility, and one clear line of accountability. These will both run directly through the Party machine, and nowhere else. For the first time, British electors will be at the mercy of regional Party organisations, if they seek redress for wrongs, advice on rights, access to institutions, or representation in disputes.

Until now, Party organisations have not been designed to perform such services, and have not been funded accordingly. To render them competent, vast investment will be needed. If this is privately funded, then a very dangerous burgeoning of influence will be likely to result. If it is to be publicly funded, it is difficult to see how single mothers, who have just lost substantial portions of their meagre allowances, will respond to such vast largesse for political Parties, which are understandably unable to fund their own activities.

The arguments leading up to these proposals have always been dubious. Whilst it can be maintained that New Labour made an abstract commitment to some form of proportional representation for the European Elections, it is quite untrue that any specific engagement was made, prescribing a closed list system. And a regional closed list is far less proportional than a national one. Votes for minorities will not be redistributed across regional boundaries, so that the result will, in any case, be skewed in favour of large established organisations.

The imposition of regional lists is one great advantage, however, if you are a Party Leader. It is a powerful inducement to obedience. Westminster Parliaments have continuously encountered problems with the European Parliament. It has always been difficult to keep MEPs "on message". They have had a regrettable tendency to "go native". The great merit of the European Parliament has lain in its attempt to create transnational political families, European "Parties", which have tentatively sought to establish a European view of matters.

British Conservatives have had an uneasy relationship with the European People's Party, the family of Christian Democrats to

which they are affiliated. By and large, the British Labour Party has been more comfortable in the Party of European Socialists, to which it is affiliated, and of which it has provided the Leader for the last five years.

But nonetheless there have been recurrent tensions between British national leaders and the MEPs belonging to their Parties. Sometimes, there have been conflicts involving a handful of European Parliamentarians with their national leaderships. But on occasion there have been major rebellions, amounting to mutiny.

In the Labour Party, there was a minor turbulence during the argument about the "Delors Two package", which sought to increase the revenues of the European Union in order to carry through a cohesion programme of economic development in Southern Europe and Ireland. Labour Members were instructed to vote against this, but some declined to do so on the grounds that the cohesion policy was sound socialism, and would in any event also prosper the richer countries of the North, which would all secure hefty contracts when new roads and other infrastructures were built in the poorer countries of the South.

More recently, a more spectacular challenge came from the European Parliamentary Labour Party during the argument about the rescission of Clause IV of the Labour Party's constitution. On this occasion, the newly elected Leader, Tony Blair, invited Members to participate in a debate about the need to change the Clause. A majority of EPLP Members were in favour of a more modern mission statement, which they thought should be appended to the old Clause, which should be preserved, in fidelity to the historical objectives of the Party. But the new Leader had clearly not wanted a debate in which other people expressed an opinion, and he became very cross with the dissenting majority of his European Parliamentarians. Spin-doctors went into action to traduce dissidents. At last there was a meeting in Brussels, when the Leader came out to call his MEPs to order. Arms were twisted, and some of the Clause IV signatories recanted. The confrontation with the EPLP turned out in fact to be a damp squib, with no fireworks, while a somewhat diffident Leader administered self-conscious

rebukes to certain members. The spin-doctors went into action at once, and the closed meeting was presented under all the headlines as a ferocious encounter in which Daniel slaughtered all the lions in the den with deftly post-modern knocks and blows.

Having won this mythical victory, the Prime Minister's pride was not assuaged. On the contrary, there were dark murmurings from his office about the condign punishment which should be expected by all those who had called his divinity into question. It was in the process of working out suitable torments for these agnostics that the decision to introduce a system of proportional representation for the European Elections in 1999 came to be seen as a disciplinary innovation.

It was always connected with explicit and specific threats. When Ministers told the press about their legislative proposals, it was always made clear to journalists that there was a connection between reform and the chastising of dissidents. Thus, on the 16th July 1997, the *Times* reported

"Some Cabinet Ministers are attracted by the greater control they believe a PR system would give Labour over its European MPs, some of whom have been notoriously "off message"."

The *Times* went on to report

"Although the details have to be worked out there is likely to be a regional list of candidates who would be elected in proportion to the votes cast. PR campaigners in the Cabinet, notably Robin Cook and Jack Cunningham, are delighted at the move, which is expected to be confirmed at tomorrow's Cabinet meeting."

That the spin-doctors had been at work seems evident, because on the same day, the *Guardian* published an editorial under the headline "Labour must go for PR". This, it said,

"provides an opportunity for Tony Blair to reform and modernise the list of Labour MEPs. The Prime Minister owes many of his Party's representatives at Strasbourg no favours at all. Massively out of touch with opinion within the Labour Party, and thriving on a political system which has virtually no effective accountability at all, some of them have used their privileged position simply to embarrass their Leader. Proportional representation will in any case mean fewer Labour MEPs ... but Mr. Blair would not be human if he did not see the

wider advantages."

This spin was confined to the London newspapers. Outside the spinning range, the story in the *Yorkshire Post* on the 17th April, neatly confined itself to the reported changes that were in prospect, without offering any explanation about why the proposals were being brought forward.

By early October, precise proposals had been distilled, but now the spin was more important than the details of the reform. On October 2nd, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that a "senior Minister" had said that moves to reform Labour's MEPs marked "the next stage of modernisation". Accordingly, I wrote to the *Telegraph* to ask about the propriety of reforming the electoral system in order to rectify disadvantages in the Labour Party's own internal procedures. The question was:

"Is your senior Minister really saying that the Prime Minister, acting only out of vindictiveness in the pursuit of internal Party squabbles, is prepared to mutilate the national electoral system in order to settle old Party scores?"

Of course, other MEPs were beginning to show some disquiet about this constant drip feed of tendentious information from the Labour Party's news' managers. But surprisingly the press itself became uneasy about the operation they were being asked to whitewash. On October 17th 1997, the *Financial Times* wrote an editorial which welcomed the principle of proportional representation for the European Elections, but expressed its reservations about the intention to use

"closed" regional lists - a system that gives the electorate no chance to vote for or against individual candidates.

The advantage of that system for party managers is obvious. In New Labour's case it has a specific purpose, making it easier to deselect the "old Labour" incumbent MEPs who won seats in the big leftward swings of 1984 and 1989. If the Conservative Party were foolish enough to use it in the same way - in its case to deselect Europhile incumbents - Tony Blair, Prime Minister, would be only the more pleased.

Labour should think again before stooping to such petty politics ...

Democracy means, or should mean, power for the people. Not just for Party machines."

Meantime, the Labour Party machine was entering a paroxysm. Since Labour MEPs were gleaning information about the new proposals, it became necessary to control what they said. The Labour Party Conference, which might have discussed all these proposals, was now safely out of the way, without having been consulted in any particular. But MEPs began to inform their Constituency organisations, and widespread disquiet resulted. Labour's National Executive hastily approved a Code of Practice, designed to prevent Members of the Parliamentary Group in Strasbourg from talking to the press about the new arrangements. It used the magic phrase which had previously been designed by the Westminster Parliamentary Party but rejected by the European Party, rendering an offence conduct which might "bring the Party into disrepute". Telling the press how New Labour intended to fiddle the European elections would, of course, instantly bring the Party into disrepute. The EPLP did not approve the new Code of Practice but "noted" it. This however failed to neuter the code. It was manifestly a breach of Parliamentary privilege for the National Executive to instruct Parliamentarians what they might, and what they might not, tell their constituents through the press. It was also, almost certainly, a breach of the European Parliament's Rule 2, which insists on the "independent mandate". I referred this question to the President of the Parliament, and it was examined by its Rules Committee. After extensive packing by Labour Members, this Committee found no breach of the rule, in spite of all the evidence.

Whilst these enquiries were continuing, four Members of the EPLP were disciplined for refusing to sign the new Code of Practice. No other Members had been asked to sign the code: but three Members had spoken on the BBC about the issue of reform. All were given twenty-four hours to accept the code, or face instant punishment. The punishment was duly administered, in the form of suspension from the EPLP. But it was soon discovered that,

contrary to Westminster practice, the European Parliamentary Labour Party did not vest such disciplinary powers in its officials, so that the suspensions were all unconstitutional. After an inelegant process of review, the suspended Members were grudgingly readmitted.

Throughout this process, all the powers of condemnation were brought into play, in a sustained campaign of denigration of those who dared to criticise the proposed reform. Hugh Kerr and I therefore sought assurances from the General Secretary about our future status: this question was only to be answered at the beginning of January when we were summarily expelled without a hearing.

* * * * *

If Political Parties are to be a functional part of democracy, then they have to run with its grain. If they do not, they become conspiracies against the popular will. New Labour is becoming just such a conspiracy, and this fact is plainly revealed in the extraordinary development involved in its selection processes for its new Parliamentary lists. This pamphlet provides a small part of the evidence on this matter.

Lord Evans of Parkside served on the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party for some years, and has been able to document the working of New Labour's selection process from close personal experience. This pamphlet contains his graphic speech to the House of Lords on 12th October 1998.

Henry Pepper is the pseudonym for somebody involved in the selection process, and his article appeared in *Tribune* on the 16th October 1998.

And the final article in this pamphlet was written by a candidate who was not selected, and was published in *The Parliament Magazine* on 28th September 1998.

Of course, each political Party was able to make its own decision about how its candidates should be chosen. Some Parties opted for a one person one vote selection procedure, in which not only the choice of candidates, but their pecking order on the final lists, were

determined by ballot. Beyond doubt the most undemocratic procedure was that in the Labour Party which put people through an examination, the marks in which were never published, to enable the judgement about both selection and ranking to be taken by a panel of leadership nominees. It is quite clear that this selection involved explicit tests of conformity. David Morris was asked how he could square his continuing membership of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament with Mr. Blair's stated preferences. David Morris is a consistent and dedicated pacifist, and he gave an honourable answer to this question. But he found himself at the bottom of the list in Wales. Of course this is an unelectable position. This implies that no supporter of nuclear disarmament should vote for New Labour, and that there is no place for pacifists in its ranks. Possibly, if this fact were widely understood, New Labour might repent of its intolerance at the next Election.

In the same way, many other persons of the left and centre-left found their way to the bottom of New Labour's heap.

But they were not the only victims. After the House of Lords voted to amend the Bill, to replace closed lists by open lists in which electors could choose which of the nominees of their chosen Party they preferred, Jack Straw once again explained that closed lists were necessary, because otherwise all the trouble already undertaken by the Party machine would be for nothing, and the voters would be able to prefer "old nags" over the washed and scrubbed Blairites and Blairettes, who were evidently more worthy. This is rather blatant ageism, and indeed, scrutiny will show that right or left, older Members have rather systematically been rejected. Of course, the number of pensioners in the population at large is constantly increasing, up to about a fifth of the population. Closely observing the low position of "old nags" on Mr. Blair's shiny new youthful lists, pensioners, too, might decide that New Labour is an inhospitable territory for them.

For whom is this Bill appropriate?

Lord Evans of Parkside

Lord Evans made this intervention in the debate on the European Parliamentary Elections Bill in the House of Lords on 12th October 1998.

My Lords, in supporting the noble Lord, Lord Alton of Liverpool, it would be apposite at this stage to refer your Lordships to the Bill's curious history. It was not included in the list of measures announced in the Queen's Speech following the election of the Labour Government. Therefore, we are entitled to assume that no one proposed altering the voting system for the European Parliament. Then, curiously, it was introduced almost without warning in October last year and had a very confused Second Reading in November. At one stage it appeared that the Home Secretary, who is not known as a zealot for proportional representation, almost indicated that he was prepared to re-examine the method of elections for the European Parliament. I do not know what subsequently happened, but unfortunately no further changes took place so far as concerns the proceedings in the House of Commons. The Bill had its Second Reading in this House in April this year in a very short debate on Maundy Thursday, just before the House rose for the Easter Recess. There was quite a long time before we came to the Committee stage on 24th and 25th June. The Bill passed without amendment through the two-day Committee stage. Here we are in October: a long period between the Committee stage and Report stage. I appreciate, of course, that the Recess took place in between, but nevertheless five months for a short Bill which had not been amended in Committee seems strange. I tend to wonder whether the reason for the long delay was to ensure that no controversy was raised before the Labour Party Conference so that the Bill could pass through that conference.

I am completely opposed to the way the Bill has been slipped through and I am also opposed to the Government's proposals. As

I speak from the point of view of someone who served for many years on the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party, that may sound strange. But what I am concerned about is that the Bill gives total control for the selection of Labour Party candidates to the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party. It does not involve the membership in any ways as regards the selection of candidates. Of even greater concern is that, as the noble Lord, Lord Alton, said, the Bill abolishes the link between the elected and the electors. That is something which I believe in the long run will prove to be detrimental to democracy itself.

While I am certainly opposed to the Government's closed lists, I am even more opposed to the methods that the Labour Party has adopted to select its candidates. I referred to this, together with my noble friend Lord Bruce of Donington, saying that it was almost getting back to the days of communism. The Minister responded, at col. 275 of Hansard for 24th June, when he said:

'My noble friends Lord Evans of Parkside and Lord Bruce of Donington made the point that we may be getting back to the days of communism – democratic centralism, if that is not an oxymoron. The answer there is to have appropriate internal party arrangements for choosing the candidates who go on the list.'

On reflection, I realised that that was a strange reply. The words used were 'appropriate internal . . . arrangements', not 'democratic internal arrangements', not even 'traditional internal arrangements'. Indeed, it is well worth asking, to whom or for whom were the arrangements appropriate? They were certainly not appropriate to the individual members of the Labour Party. If the selection and placement on the list of the candidates of the Labour Party had been by the individual party members using a one member, one vote ballot both in the selection of the candidates and placing them on the list, I would have found the proceedings to be a little more acceptable. But in truth the selection process is ruthlessly controlled by the NEC, acting in what can only be described as a central committee fashion.

As I pointed out on the last occasion in Committee and confirm now, the selectors consisted of 11 members appointed by the

National Executive Committee. Those 11 members interviewed 160 people who were on the panels of candidates who had been selected by the nine regions in England and in Scotland and Wales. They were all interviewed over one weekend, just before the party conference. There were quite a few complaints from some of the candidates about the relevance of some of the questions they were asked. There was even some suggestion that there had been a complete stitch-up and that the lists had been agreed before the candidates were interviewed. I have not the faintest idea whether there is any truth in relation to those comments.

However, there was pointed out in the reports to which I referred the dangers of some people being put on a regional list when they were not residents or members of that region. On 24th June I said:

'I wish to address a point directly to my noble friend the Minister. I am concerned about the danger of disillusionment among party members in relation to having candidates imposed on their regions.' [Official Report, 24/6/98; col. 314.]

There are a number of strange anomalies in those lists and I shall refer to only three. But it is an indication of the concern which has been expressed by many members of the Labour Party. A Manchester MEP has been selected as the number one candidate for the south-west region. A Merseyside MEP has been selected as the number three candidate for Yorkshire. A Cheshire MEP has been selected as the number three candidate in Wales. That will mean that all those candidates will be elected to the European Parliament.

I know that all those men are excellent. The chances are that others who may find themselves in similar positions may also be excellent men and women. But they were not selected by the members of that region. They would be in a much stronger position if they had been selected by the members of that region.

What I also find of great concern is that acceptance of the one member, one vote rule within the party was dropped by New Labour at the first series of elections after the general election. I remind your Lordships that the struggle to introduce one member, one vote in the Labour Party took almost 10 years before it came to

fruition. On behalf of the National Executive Committee, I moved the first resolution to introduce selection of parliamentary candidates by one member, one vote at the 1984 conference in Blackpool. It was not until 1993 that the party finally accepted that all parliamentary candidates would be selected on the basis of one member, one vote.

Of course, the great *raison d'être* for the introduction of one member, one vote was that it would introduce widespread democracy within the party, it would give the party members a voice and a vote in the selection of their candidates and it would be a wonderful message to give to people who were party supporters to join the party. It was used for the 1994 European elections and for the last general election. This is the first election since then, and it has now apparently been dropped. Perhaps that is because the OMOV method selects too many horny-handed sons of toil and not enough of the meritocrats who seem to find favour in certain sections of the party.

One argument which was used to defend the closed lists is that it was said that more women and black candidates would be elected. What are the facts? Currently there are 13 women MEPs and one black Labour MEP. The party now boasts, with the new lists, that there will be 34 women and six black candidates. That sounds like a huge increase. However, on examining the lists we find that the realistic chances of election mean that there will be 13 women and one black candidate who will almost certainly be elected. It does not sound much of an advance on the current situation.

The other point that should be made is that when the Bill receives its Third Reading some time later this month, if it is not amended, it will have taken almost 12 months to pass through the parliamentary process. When the Government were first challenged about the reasons for introducing the closed lists and dropping the OMOV method of selecting Labour Party candidates, it was claimed that there was insufficient time to use the party's traditional methods to select the candidates. The party has selected all its candidates; it has placed them on the list. The Bill has not reached the statute book yet and the elections will not take place for

another eight months. It seems to me that there was all the time in the world to use the party's method of one member, one vote to select the candidates.

The real reason for the selection method is, frankly, that those who now manage New Labour are determined to exercise control over those who are selected as candidates and, more important, those who will not be candidates. What can best be said about it is that the party members apparently cannot now be trusted to select the candidates who are required and the electors will not be trusted to select the Members of Parliament from the candidates. The list is now fixed. The electorate will have one vote in those elections if the Government's methods are adopted.

I pointed out in Committee, and repeat now, that that is bad enough in relation to those on official party lists. But when there are Independents standing – and in all the elections we have ever had there have always been people standing as Independents – it becomes an outrage. If, say there are 10 Independents for the 10 seats available in the north west region all the elector will be able to do is cast one vote for one Independent. That vote will only carry the value of one candidate whereas if the elector votes for 10 Conservative candidates, 10 Liberal Democrat candidates or 10 Labour candidates, he then gets 10 for his vote. That is a gross unfairness in regard to how the election is conducted.

The amendment throws challenges to the Conservatives and to the Liberal Democrats, because the Conservatives have made it absolutely clear that they are opposed to any form of proportional representation. The noble Lord, Lord Alton, to whom I listened with great interest, referred to the Leader of the Conservative Party having made clear at Bournemouth that he was opposed to any form of proportional representation. However, all we have on offer in the Bill is this strange form of election which cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as proportional representation.

At their conference the Liberal Democrats made it clear that when Lord Jenkins's committee reports they do not want to see any watered down version. They want full and proper proportional

representation, and so I suggest that today they support the amendment; otherwise we might find that a lot of people who were in support of proportional representation will not be too interested in how they perform after Lord Jenkins's report. I say to the House that my great concern is that there has been a long struggle for proportional representation in this country. I believe that if this method is adopted for these elections, then the chances are that no one in future will offer much support for PR in any other elections. I support the amendment of the noble Lord, Lord Alton.

Confessions of a selector

The pseudonymous Henry Pepper helped to choose Labour's Euro candidates for 1999. He does not wish to repeat the experiment.

On 17 September, I was among those summoned as regional representatives to Stoke Rochford to form part of a regional board to select Labour Party candidates for next year's elections to the European Parliament. We were to consider sitting MEPs, plus new candidates selected by one member, one vote in each Euro constituency.

Each board comprised five members of Labour's National Executive Committee, two other members nominated by the NEC, the General Secretary and three regional representatives. In other words, eight unvarying NEC people and three variable regional people. Apart from the General Secretary and Ian McCartney MP, these are less well-known figures. It took a little time to put faces to names.

Prior to Stoke Rochford, we were thoroughly patronised at training sessions. We were lectured on such thrilling subjects as 'How the European Parliament Works' as though we were new Labour Party members. Other advice was more useful, such as how to look out for candidates' dress sense. We were also invited to cross-check the assistant general secretary's 'blind' marking of each candidate's application form, which counted 30 per cent toward the final mark.

At the big event itself at Stoke Rochford, each MEP and candidate gave a four-minute presentation to their relevant regional board on why they would be a good candidate. Regional representatives from any other regions where they had expressed a second or third preference sat in on these presentations. This involved representatives in a fair amount of sitting around waiting and, perhaps not surprisingly, attendance was patchy. Occasionally, representatives simply did not turn up, found the lure of the golf course too great or went to the toilet at the wrong time and missed

it, so brisk was the process.

The four-minute presentations were sudden death to many candidates. Sitting MEPs were guaranteed progress to the next stage. But a candidate who had attended several Constituency Labour Party selections, winning at least one and then won a one-member, one-vote ballot over the Euro constituency could be ditched after just those four minutes. Some candidates were unable to repeat the eloquence they had demonstrated to CLPs and were summarily cast aside.

The survivors and the MEPs then progressed to 'interview mode', where the same board attempted – and in some embarrassing cases succeeded – to tear them apart with hostile questions. Presentations counted 30 per cent toward the final score, interviews 40 per cent.

Everyone was expected to behave as though they were real candidates, giving the Labour Party line rather than their own opinions. This gave me a creepy feeling about candidates who I knew actually believed otherwise. It gave me an even more creepy feeling about candidates who reeled off the approved line with suspicious promptness and fluency. We decided that we were not going to have such androids in our region.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, all the marks had been added up. The results were distributed to the regional representatives for the relevant region only and we were not supposed to look at any other regions. However, we did catch the odd glimpse. The forms were also collected back at the end, but one representative photocopied his.

An official then gave us a general run-down of the scores, which were in bands A to E. We were not to divulge to anyone what score candidates had got, particularly not the three MEPs who had only got Es. However, the official did tell us their names. This emphasis on secrecy was rather like extolling the necessity for marital fidelity to United States presidential candidates.

Representatives seemed to take this injunction to discretion very seriously. It was just that a few of them felt they had to take a walk in the garden at that point and felt the need to chat to someone or other on their mobile telephones.

The scores were generally agreed to be fair although, in a few instances, I wondered whether the NEC people had been at the same interviews as I had.

Each selection board (without Ian McCartney, who had to depart on sudden and urgent family business) then met to arrive at the final decisions on candidates and rankings for their region. Sometimes this was quick and easy, sometimes long and difficult. The results are now known.

One hopes that this process will never be repeated. The NEC people clearly had some favoured candidates. The rules seemed to be a bit elastic at one point. The strength of a candidate's support in his or her nominating region appeared to count for little.

Assessing candidates on forms and interviews cannot help but have a considerable subjective element. It seemed to me that scores sometimes reflected the preconceptions about a candidate rather than their actual performance. Above all, such small numbers of people should never wield such power.

We were instructed not to reveal the final results to any of the candidates. I kept this injunction for a couple of hours and then succumbed to an irresistible temptation to be the bearer of good news.

Such naivety.

'Have you heard?', I asked. 'Well, yes', replied the candidate.

Confessions of a candidate

A failed candidate in the Labour Party's controversial selection process for the 1999 European elections cries 'fix' and argues that if he is right there could be serious consequences for the European Parliament.

The British Labour Party's move to Proportional Representation for the 1999 European Elections promised to make voting fairer. But, the evidence of New Labour's selection process for candidates raises serious issues for democracy in Europe and not least, that of the European Parliament's own credibility.

After 18 years in the political wilderness and its return to power amid widespread acclaim throughout Europe, New Labour has stretched the credibility of its modernisation and reform too far.

Sitting Labour MEPs and other selected candidates for the 1999 European Election learnt their fate this week following marathon interviews by the party's National Executive Committee at Stoke Rochford Hall, a country mansion near Grantham, UK – Middle England in every sense.

Retiring General Secretary Tom Sawyer and members of the NEC listened to over 120, four-minute speeches and then organised 'hostile mock press interviews' for a final selection process that exposed candidates to series of aggressive political and personal attacks, supposedly to see how they would stand up to pressures from the media.

This was after an elaborate nation-wide selection procedure that began in May when local European Constituency Parties (ECLPs) were each invited to nominate both a male and a female candidate. The ensuing postal ballot almost bankrupted most ECLPs. These are now to be formally wound up to make way for 11 new Euro Regions each with hand-picked steering committees.

Sitting MEPs had to gain the support of at least 50 per cent of voluntary members in 'trigger ballots'. All 49 Labour MEPs wanting to return easily won the ballots – all but two with scores between 90 and 100 per cent.

However, as the NEC interviews drew near it became clear that the Party choices had already been made. Rumours, in both Brussels and Party headquarters at Millbank, have now been proven roughly accurate with some people having even predicted the order of candidates likely in each region. The results clearly support those early rumours of a 'cull'.

Tony Blair is said never to have forgiven Labour MEPs for signing a *Guardian* newspaper advert some years ago opposing his plan to abolish Clause 4 of the Labour constitution, which set out the socialist principles. Therefore, a purge was always on the cards. So why this elaborate interview and selection process?

Culled candidates can be forgiven for being cynical about the elaborate mock media interviews. Politicians can be trained to deal with the media once they are elected. It is not unreasonable to suppose that these elaborate interviews were a 'smoke screen'.

Party Assistant General Secretary David Gardener reassured candidates at briefing meetings in both London and Manchester that the selection would be 'free and transparent', a remark that caused a titter of laughter amongst the audiences. A far more sinister note was struck when one Party official warned assembled hopefuls: 'We know who you are'.

In the minutes before their interviews nervous candidates were asked to sign an absurd declaration: 'I wish to declare to the Selections Board the following matters which, if revealed, could publicly embarrass the Labour Party or affect public confidence in my position'.

Was this something learnt from New Labour's visits to the Clinton Campaign? Everyone was also ordered to sign a Memorandum handing over some of their staff allowances to the party; probably a breach of European Parliament rules. The rule of the day was: no signature, no interview.

The Stalinist atmosphere continued with the arrival of heavyweight figures from the Party and favoured trade unions. All candidates were warned that if they shared information about the progress of the interviews they faced immediate disqualification from the process.

During the interviews, several MEPs I spoke with said they felt they were exposed to bitter personal attacks, the purpose of which was to destroy them as credible politicians.

Some bloody attacks took place, with seasoned MEPs physically stumbling from the interview room after vicious attacks from the panel. One MEP said: 'How dare they treat our people like this!'

Another colleague said this week 'this is a complete charade. The Party has lost control of itself. MPs at Westminster will soon find this purge system being applied to them'.

The ruthlessness of the Purge is now clear. No less than 24 MEPs by my reckoning face the sack if predictions prove to be accurate for June 1999 with only a handful of handpicked new entrants likely to make it.

My essential complaint is that a small number of people in the Labour Party have had total control of the selection process and its outcome. They have determined who is to stand, and in what order – not the membership. The Party Conference at Blackpool will now rubber-stamp the list in its entirety. How can it do otherwise?

These developments have profound implications for the European Parliament. Part of the pressure on Britain from its EU partners to adopt a proportional representation system was to make the Parliament more democratic. However, the 'closed list' system, which gives voters no choice about whom to support in each Party, has grave dangers for democracy. These are clearly illustrated by the Stoke Rochford fiasco.

If it turns out that the 1999 intake of Labour MEPs are obliged automatically to obey what the Labour Party at home says without being able to make individual judgements, they will not be Parliamentarians in the accepted sense. The essential element of representational democracy is that, within broad limits, people will have doubts, different feelings and varying priorities and that this is very healthy for Parties and the people that they claim to represent.

It is chilling to remember that Stalin and the Fascists ran the last political parties that refused their representatives absolutely any individual leeway. Mussolini might have been describing New Labour when he said: 'No discussion, only obedience'.

The terrible fate that has befallen what was once a great socialist party is clear to many of us who still believe in Labour Party values. As one unhappy MEP said last weekend: 'We won the general election because of our attack on Tory sleaze. But this is another form of political corruption'.

The 'take-over' is based on entryist tactics. Scandals about the NEC elections, the taking of money from dubious characters, the false membership records and bitter in-fighting in the Party fit in with that style of politics.

Ironically, British Tory MEPs achieved a victory earlier this year when they fended off a similar attack from leader William Hague and Tory Central Office. Through superb organisational skills and mobilising the 'blue rinse' brigade in the provinces of Britain, they ensured that the leadership and party officials did not have their way. Only three Tory MEPs were effectively 'deselected'. They too have openly expressed their distaste for PR and for the closed list system.

By contrast, the EPLP negotiated a poor deal for their members, one that was destined to end in tears. Sitting MEPs had no opportunity to lobby and were, in fact, prohibited from campaigning for support in their regions.

Labour's tragedy will be felt in Europe generally and in the European Parliament in particular. The other Member States were hoping that Britain would under New Labour become a sensible player in Europe following years of nonsense from the Tories.

If national party leaderships can get away with appointing robotic apparatchiks to the European Parliament it will be catastrophic for democracy. For too long politicians who think Westminster is the centre of the universe have held sway over Britain's relations with Europe.

'Solidarity' is a common phrase used in the European Parliament. MEPs and MPs should reflect that if this sort of ruthless politics continues, they might well be next. Nothing could do more to undermine the credibility of the institution as a whole.

On the selection of candidates, I won't apologise for our party wanting the best possible candidates to represent us in the elections for the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly. It is a measure of how important we believe these bodies are.

The Scottish and Welsh parties decided to use a selection panel to vet potential candidates, a process used successfully to choose every single one of our by-election candidates for the last decade and for our 8,000 council candidates for years before that. ... We used the same system to select candidates for the Euro elections.

Tony Blair, *The Independent*, 20.11.94

"Benjamin felt a nose nuzzling at his shoulder. He looked round. It was Clover. Her old eyes looked dimmer than ever. Without saying anything, she tugged gently at his mane and led him round to the end of the big barn, where the Seven Commandments were written. For a minute or two they stood gazing at the tarred wall with its white lettering.

"My sight is failing," she said finally. "Even when I was young I could not have read what was written there. But it appears to me that that wall looks different. Are the Seven Commandments the same as they used to be, Benjamin?"

For once Benjamin consented to break his rule, and he read out to her what was written on the wall. There was nothing there now except a single Commandment. It ran:

**ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL
BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS"**

George Orwell: *Animal Farm*