

Interview with Hans-August Lückner: the founding of the European People's Party (Bonn, 15 May 2006)

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[François Klein] In June 1976 you presented the draft statute of the European People's Party, which was adopted on 8 July. How did the idea of founding a European Party arise?

[Hans-August Lückner] It was a logical political development. As Christian Democrats — and the same can be said for large parts of the SPD and other parties as well as ourselves — we had a mission to build a single Europe. This Europe had to have some form, a form enshrined in international law. To date, the EU has no status in international law; the Council of Ministers has such status, but not the EU per se. What we were calling for, in line with Robert Schuman's demand in his document of 9 May 1950, was a European federation. That is a clear concept, a European federation. It does not have to resemble a federation in the American or German style, but it has to have a federal structure.

That is the main point of the Declaration of 9 May, not the coal and steel community. The coal and steel community is dealt with as one part, albeit an important one, but as a first step. Of course, even the longest of journeys starts with one step, that goes without saying, but the declaration mentions it twice: the 'first step in the federation of Europe' and, the second time it is mentioned, 'a European federation indispensable to the preservation of peace'. That is a vision of the future, and I marvel today at the farsightedness of our wise old men when, back then, they were able to grasp the possibility that Europe might continue waging war with itself, as it had done for three hundred long years; just look at what has happened in the Balkans.

We do not really understand Europe. When we say Europe, we think of France, Germany, Italy, large countries in other words. But we are nothing. We are small, middling countries. Every African country is two or three times bigger. Iran is four times the size of France. You need to know that, if you want to engage in politics! I always say: Europe the way we saw it in my day was nothing more than an enlarged Balkans. An enlarged Balkans, that was Europe.

And that is when people said, we need a federation. If you say that, you must not only have the will, you must also have the instruments to make it a reality. Will is important, what you want, but you must also have the means, the instruments, to bring it about, and that was made explicit in this demand for a European federation. But if that is what you want, then you must also be prepared to take the consequences. One cannot call for a European federation but in reality continue to operate as a nation state. But if Europe is what one wants, one must have a political vehicle, a party, which will promote the idea publicly and defend it.

That was the first major resistance I encountered. The grandees of the national Christian Democratic parties said 'What for? We already exist as a party, that is enough.' I said 'Yes indeed, you are great parties in national politics, but not in Europe. How do you propose to conduct an election campaign?' That was a bitter pill to swallow. Now the national leaders suddenly realised that something had to be formed which stood above them. We are already there, that is enough, why create yet another forum to stand above us? The answer is what I have just said to you on the point of a forum at world level for agricultural policy. When you want to implement something at a particular level, you need a vehicle for it: at national level, national political institutions; at district level, a district council, or some forum which will be responsible for action at that level.

So my proposal was, instead of the 12 or 15 national parties, to have one European party. I had a very good friend in Mariano Rumor, Prime Minister of Italy. I must have spent 20 nights talking to him until three o'clock in the morning, until he finally said 'Hans-August, I know you are right, but what will become of me?' I said to him 'Mariano, you are the pope of all the world's Christian Democratic parties, and you will still be that as far as I'm concerned. But Europe needs a party of its own, and now the time has come for us to give the Christian Democrats a new structure. We need a party which also embraces the European countries that do not belong to the EC — the Council of Europe — we need a party on national lines, and we need a party on international lines. You are still the pope for all of us, with your seat in Rome, where the other Pope also has his See, and you will hold on to our institute, which was led by Professor Hahn. The

party of the Council of Europe, that should be led by Hassel, Mr von Hassel, who is a member of the Council of Europe and of Western European Union and has a certain role there and has the abilities for that; he has also been President of the German Bundestag and a minister, he can do that. And the third party, the European party, should have a Belgian as leader because he would already be based in Brussels, and it would be a great advantage for the party concerned with the EC to have someone based in Brussels, at the hub of things.'

It took me two years. There were people, the Luxembourgers ... even the Belgians were to some extent favourable. But the trouble began with the Dutch, and the Italians as well. The Germans were in favour, but did nothing about it. Well, after two years of breaking rocks I got a first breakthrough when Mariano Rumor said to me one day 'Hans-August, you are right, I give in.' If that had not happened, there would have been no European party. I needed Rumor. I said to my daughter 'Take good care of Mr Rumor!' Indeed, he often came to visit me, and my daughter was a good hostess. I said to her 'Take good care of Mr Rumor! If he does not say "yes", I am finished.' And one night, it was two or half-past two in the morning, and he said 'Hans-August, I have listened to you for over a year now. I realise that you have always said the same thing, even if you used different words. And I realise that you are right, and I have to face up to that, even if it hurts. So let us set up a party.' And it went on from there.

Second problem: what would the party be called? I said we would no longer call ourselves a Christian Democratic party, we would be the European People's Party. It was this last question that had to be decided by a vote during the founding procedure. There was no unanimity. The Dutch opposed it to the end. They had three parties: a Catholic People's Party, the Christian Historical Union, and the strongest party of the — what are they called again? — in Switzerland, not Lutherans, but Calvinists. And the head of the Calvinists was my good friend, who said to me 'Hans-August, I can't put this to my people. You know, these are people who, if they want or need to laugh, they wait until midnight and go down to the cellar so that nobody can see or hear them.' Then I said 'I can't do it either. If you are in favour, OK.' The last question during the founding was 'Mr President, we have one more question for our friend, Mr Lücker: is that the last offer he has to make?' My offer was 'European People's Party', below which appeared the wording 'Association of Christian Democratic Parties in the Member States of the European Union'. Then came the challenge: 'Is that your last offer?' I said 'Yes. Anything else will be over my dead body; this is where I stand.' It went to a vote. The Dutch abstained, which at European level does not prevent unanimous adoption. So, aside from the Dutch, adoption was effectively unanimous.

Saved! I was saved! That was an important point for me because, in the middle of the 1970s, people began to realise that it was no longer possible to establish a state which identified itself as 'Christian' or 'Catholic'. A move from the Christian to the secular was already in progress at that time. And I had seen that that would continue, as would the Christian view, but there was no longer a future for a Christian party. I chose a name which had previously existed. Don Sturzo, the Christian forefather of the Christian Democratic movement, named his party 'Italian People's Party'. I said that to them, too. So in the end I had them all, apart from the Dutch, and the Dutch abstained — I was happy.

The third problem was that, in Article 4 of the statute text, I wanted to insert a statement that any individual and any party could be a member if that individual or party accepted our political programme — not our doctrine, but the political programme. If they accepted it, they were welcome. After the decision was taken that we would no longer call ourselves a Christian party, that became less difficult, but it had previously been very controversial. Today we have 68 member parties and, thanks to this Statute, we became the strongest political force in Europe from the first election on — and have not become less Christian than we were. I consider that to be one of the greatest successes that I achieved with the founding of this party. I would not have believed that we would already be the strongest party in 1980, but since 1979 we have been the strongest party and have pushed the international Socialists into second place. Today, even without the Conservatives, we boast 320 against 260 MEPs.

Those were the three big problems; everything else was routine. But those were the three big issues, and even today I have a sense of personal satisfaction and pride that I managed to settle them all. But I have to be honest; my best advocate was Mr von Hassel, a Protestant, but a good man; my second staunch ally was

Mariano Rumor, who was fully on my side; and the third was Bertrand, the Belgian Alfred Bertrand, who was always like this with me. Those three stood firm, and thanks to them it was a success. And I had the good fortune to become acquainted with the representative of our youth organisation, in the person of the current President, Wilfried Martens, whom I immediately brought onto my staff. I involved him significantly in all the work, both on the Statute and on the party programme. He gladly took it on, and he still values the experience from that time — he was 30 years old — and I believe he gained a lot from that work.

At all events, the party came into being and the President was elected, also on a proposal from me. There was no better candidate. Then we went into the election campaign, and that was good. We had no member party in two countries, Britain and Denmark. So we got no votes in those countries. Yet despite this, we still had the highest number of votes. That encouraged me!