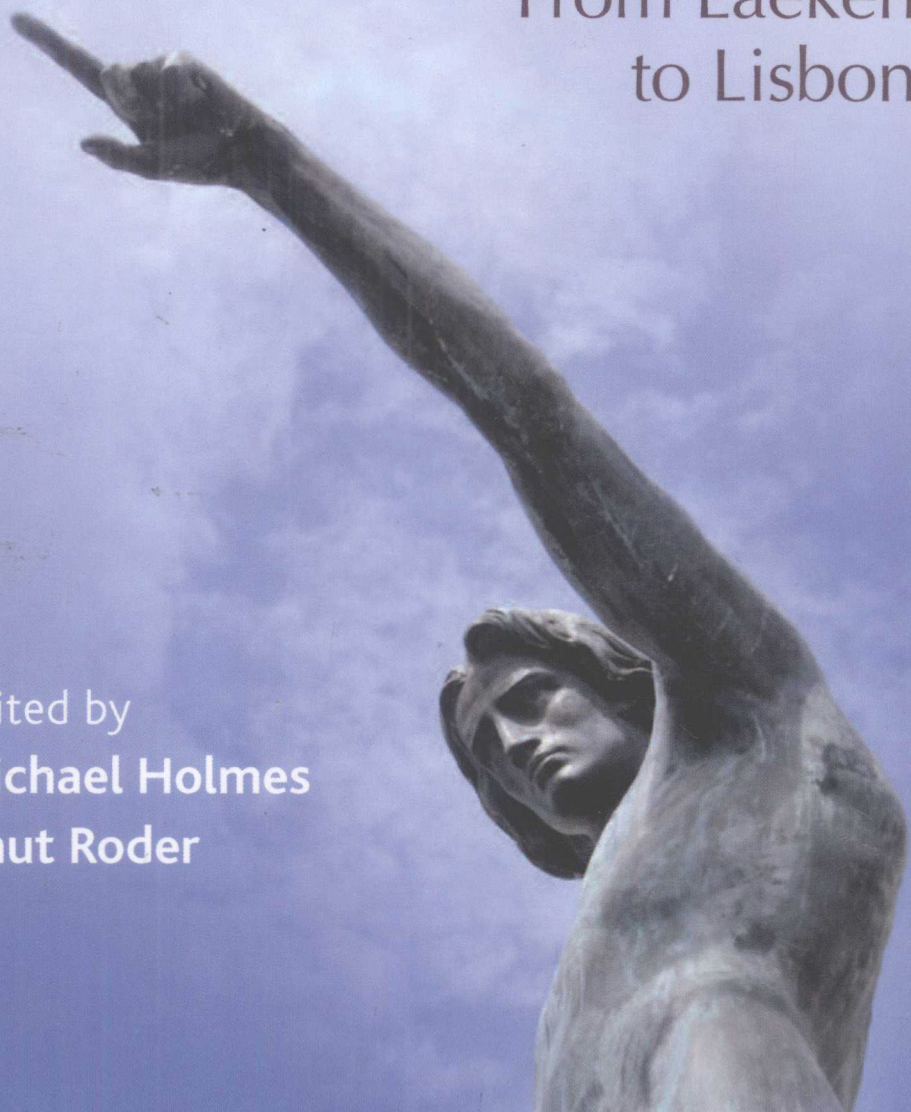


# THE LEFT AND THE EUROPEAN CONSTITUTION

From Laeken  
to Lisbon

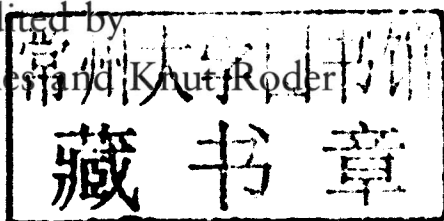
Edited by  
**Michael Holmes**  
**Knut Roder**



# The Left and the European Constitution

*From Laeken to Lisbon*

Edited by  
Michael Holmes and Knut Roder



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# Preface

*Sylvia-Yvonne Kaufmann*

This edited volume is devoted to a set of very interesting and highly topical questions: how have Europe's political parties on the Left/centre-Left positioned themselves and what were their policy priorities in regard to the EU's constitutional process, a process that was launched in Laeken in 2000 and finally completed with the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009? The central theme of this book thus deals with the fascinating question: what was the attitude of political parties on the Left towards the project of European integration?

Without question, the European Constitution and the subsequent Treaty of Lisbon have been a novelty in international politics. For the first time an international treaty was not negotiated behind closed doors by government representatives alone, as had been the case with all European treaties since the founding of the EEC. Instead, at the heart of the comprehensive reform of the European Union was, for the first time, a European Convention, later called the Constitutional Convention, which met throughout 2002 and 2003 to complete its work. Twenty-eight countries gathered at the Convention on an equal footing: current EU member states as well as future EU members, with even Turkish representatives playing their part. Furthermore, the Convention not only included representatives from governments and the European Commission, but the majority of its 102 members came from the European Parliament and the national parliaments. Finally, the fact that the future of European integration was for the first time negotiated within the public domain lent the convention process an extraordinary dynamism.

Almost all of the relevant political and economically influential forces attempted to promote their visions and ideas. In addition,

non-governmental organisations (NGOs) intensively lobbied individual members of the Convention to make their specific concerns heard. Not only did they produce general position papers, but they also met with us for personal talks and promoted detailed proposals for draft texts of treaty provisions on issues of particular importance to them.

Many political actors focused on the work of the Convention, as they were clearly aware of the vast implications that it would have for the future development of the EU. It is worth noting here that one of the best-known NGOs on the Left, Attac, which later played a central role in the movement to oppose the European Constitutional Treaty (ECT) during the constitutional referendum in France, did not engage with the Convention at all, failing to put forward any suggestions or proposals of its own.

Negotiations at the Constitutional Convention proved extremely difficult. Most Convention members were dedicated to a successful reshaping of Europe's common destiny by replacing, or at least substantially altering, the previous treaties on which European Union integration had been based. However, it soon became apparent that there were many quite divergent visions of a common future for Europe among the representatives at the Convention.

Nevertheless, the Convention was ultimately capable of envisioning and reaching compromises on a bundle of problems that had been awaiting resolution for years. Compromise was possible only because of a strong determination and willingness by most of the Convention's members to search for solutions. It is fair to say that a maximum degree of compromise was ultimately achieved, not only across country and party lines, but also and above all between political players who wanted to deepen integration and those who aimed at strengthening the role of the nation-state or even the renationalisation of policy responsibilities. The final draft of the ECT, as Convention President Giscard d'Estaing fittingly put it during the final meeting of the Convention on 10 July 2003, was 'a consensus ... [and] far from being the lowest common denominator, represents the highest point achievable today without the risk of tearing apart the still fragile fabric of the European Union'.<sup>1</sup>

While the ECT, like the Lisbon Treaty, certainly has its shortcomings and contradictions, it steered clear of dictating an exclusively conservative, liberal, green, social democratic or socialist vision for Europe. As with any constitution, the Treaty of Lisbon reflects the political realities at the time of its development. At the same time, it clearly offers new opportunities for the Left to accomplish its aims. Compared with the previous situation, the strengthening of parliaments

and the introduction of direct democratic participation in the form of the citizens' initiative represents a quantum leap in enhancing democracy within the European Union.

Throughout the constitutional process from Laeken to Lisbon, the Convention was probably the most important single event, but the Left was already divided even at this early stage. Some viewed the Convention as a unique opportunity to influence the social and democratic direction of the European integration process well beyond the usual opportunities. Others perceived it as nothing more than a particularly sophisticated scheme employed by those in power – wrapped in some supposedly democratic process – to disguise the true capitalist structure of domination and further enhance their vision of a 'European superstate' contrary 'to the will of the people'.

While some on the Left fought bitterly within their party families over the few seats available at the Convention and to participate in the reform process and plug their aims and visions for the EU, others did not wish to take part in this reform process at all. They rejected the creation of the Convention on the same ideological grounds as they had used in rejecting each of the previous European treaties, including a document as progressive as the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The dividing line on the Left was once again the traditional one, a contrast of perceptions between 'reform' and 'revolution', and the question of whether to engage in complex political processes or to insist instead on a fundamental opposition to the system. This conflict was at the heart of the Left's discourse over the ECT and Lisbon that continued throughout the constitutional period and the years following, up to and including the final adoption of the Lisbon Treaty.

The Social Democratic, Socialist Left and Green parties tried hard to guarantee that their ideas would be incorporated in the Convention's draft constitution. They understood that their engagement would be instrumental in enhancing the possibility of success for the constitutional process as a whole, while acknowledging at the same time that they would have to accept some unpopular compromises in the process.

By contrast, left-wing socialists and communists followed events from a distance and were completely disengaged, ignoring the opportunity to target and intervene in an ongoing political process. In contrast to the other two party families on the Left, this group of parties did not offer any concrete proposals or conceptual ideas of their own, not even on issues such as the division of competencies between the EU and its member states, the democratization of the EU, the principle of subsidiarity, or even the question of social Europe.

A partial exception in this regard was the German PDS. The party supported the draft ECT at first, but later changed its official position to one of opposition, essentially due to three main reasons: first, a heavy defeat in the 2002 Bundestag election meant that the PDS had been almost completely wiped off the stage for policy-making at the national level. In order to enable the party to compete more successfully at the polls in 2004 to the European Parliament, it was decided that the party would programmatically adopt a unique policy position which would clearly distinguish it from the 'neo-liberal consensus garbage' of all other German parties, and in particular the SPD. Second, the PDS's sister parties within the European Parliament's GUE/NGL group, such as the French PCF, were urging the adoption of a common 'No' position on the ECT in order to create 'unity and cohesion' within the party group. Third, the ECT fell victim to an inter-party dispute between the PDS's reform wing and its more fundamentalist forces, which was linked to questions over the formation of a PDS-SPD-based coalition in the German capital of Berlin.

In the end, the self-proclaimed pro-Europe PDS lapsed back into a traditional political and ideological discourse. Accordingly, the PDS began to campaign strongly, together with its sister parties, against the European Constitution and later against the Lisbon Treaty, purposely distorting many of the treaties' contents in the process.

The PDS (by now *Die Linke*) was far from being the only party in which the party's relationship to the constitutional process was dominated by national electoral strategies and inner-party power struggles. The French Socialist Party is another particularly dramatic example of a party in which some factions supported the ECT while others opposed it, in a conflict that led to a level of inner-party carnage from which the party has still not yet fully recovered. There were also other cases of parties on the Left in which party positioning on European policy issues was determined not by concerns over Europe, but instead by policy choices reflecting primarily domestic politics and national political strategies.

On a more general note, a key problem of parties on the Left operating in our increasingly globalised world lies in the fact that their day-to-day policy choices reflect predominantly national policy deliberations. For this reason, party policies on European integration are unfortunately still viewed as of secondary importance, even in the case of strongly pro-integrationist social democratic and socialist parties.

To this day, political parties on the Left woefully fail to give policy-making at the European level the crucial attention it deserves and tend to neglect it. Parties on the Left need to intervene in a far more decisive

manner to promote their political goals, engage with and influence public debate, and set out far more visibly their policy visions and priorities on Europe, so as to thereby challenge the hegemonic power of the dominant neo-liberal mainstream. Any public opinion survey conducted in the EU will undoubtedly confirm, for example, that none of the European political parties (i.e. party families operating transnationally) are currently perceived by the wider public as actual political actors.

When the Treaty of Lisbon entered into effect on 1 December 2009, a debate on Europe's most important reform initiative – which had lasted nearly a decade – was finally concluded successfully. Social Democratic, Socialist and Green parties have indeed made a great contribution to the deepening and further development of the European integration process. With regard to economic, employment and social-policy issues in particular, a breakthrough was reached which made it possible to put an end to the EU's long-dominant neo-liberal policy orientation. The Lisbon Treaty now contains provisions on common policy goals such as 'balanced economic growth', 'sustainable development' and 'full employment'. This successful change of direction has created foundations upon which all parties on the European Left can build in working for the future advancement of Europe's social and ecological policies. Inclusion in the treaty of the stated aim of developing a 'social market economy' is a great success after more than fifty years of integration, and generally confirms a move away from the EU's previous orthodoxy of free-market competition.

In the journey from Laeken to Lisbon the Left has had to learn some lessons the hard way. With their detailed analyses, the authors of this book demonstrate that it is worthwhile to look back and consider the lessons that parties on the Left can learn from dealing with integration. However, the lessons discussed in the book can also be used to aid parties in making policy and strategic choices in the future. The newly introduced treaty provisions, mentioned above, should offer the Left effective tools with which to enhance the peaceful, democratic, social direction of Europe. Yet these new provisions need to be realized on a daily basis so as to ensure that the interests of Europe's citizens are protected by the basic principles of freedom, justice and solidarity. Let us be under no illusions: national self-interest of all kinds, narrow-minded anti-EU populism, elitist remoteness from citizens' concerns, and a growing gap between rich and poor create a potent threat to the project of European integration. My participation in the Constitutional Convention has taught me that the future of the European Union's integration project, with its current twenty-seven member

states, remains uncertain and very fragile. In fact, a single market and currency alone cannot keep Europe together, as the recent example of the Greek financial crisis clearly shows. A united Europe can fail, if we do not succeed in creating a social Europe. For this reason, the road ahead for Europe's political parties on the Left remains a difficult one.

Sylvia-Yvonne Kaufmann  
Berlin, 9 June 2011

### Notes

- 1 [www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/fr/conveur/76615.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/fr/conveur/76615.pdf), p. 3 (accessed 9 October 2011).

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Michael Holmes, Liverpool  
Knut Roder, Madrid  
June 2012



# Abbreviations

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| CEE     | Central and Eastern Europe                                  |
| ECE     | East-Central European [states]                              |
| ECT     | European Constitutional Treaty                              |
| EGP     | European Green Party  |
| ELDR    | European Liberal Democrats and Reform Party                 |
| EP      | European Parliament   |
| ESDP    | European Security and Defence Policy                        |
| EU      | European Union  |
| G/EFA   | Greens/European Free Alliance [EP group]                    |
| GUE/NGL | European United Left/Nordic Green Left [EP group]           |
| MEP     | Member of the European Parliament                           |
| PEL     | Party of the European Left                                  |
| PES     | Party of European Socialists                                |
| S&D     | Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (EP group) |
| TEU     | Treaty on European Union                                    |