BRIEFING
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The European Parliament and the origins of social policy

SUMMARY

During the first decades of European integration, the European Community's social dimension was only rudimentary, and its main objective was to compensate for the negative effects of the common market. This briefing sheds light on the European Parliament's early role in the evolution of social policy as one of the fields in which the Community had only limited consultative competences, yet which saw increasing Community activity during the 'long 1970s'.

The briefing discusses how Members and Parliament staff pushed for a stronger social dimension to the Community project in pursuit of two strategic aims: first, they sought to make 'Europe' more tangible to its people through improved living and working conditions, and by demonstrating the Parliament's concern for citizens. Second, Members aimed to strengthen the Parliament's position within the Community's institutional system as representing the people, their interests and needs. The European Parliament increasingly became a norm-setter in European social policy, mainly by Members promoting concrete measures and minimum standards, in contrast to the often vague and general social agenda of the Council, and to some – albeit a lesser – extent the Commission.

This briefing shows how Members acquired and consolidated the necessary expertise, strategic positioning and institutional self-confidence for effective socio-political activism during the 'long 1970s'. It also discusses the importance of Members' socialisation and their contacts with other institutions and actors in the emerging European multi-level governance system, which allowed Members to co-shape the Community's social agenda and competences over the long term.

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Introduction

Prior to the 1987 Single European Act (SEA), the European Community had only limited socio-political competences. However, the area of social policy saw increasing Community activity from the late 1960s onwards. One driving force behind this activity was the European Parliament. This briefing demonstrates how Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and Parliament staff pushed for a stronger social dimension to the Community project during the 'long 1970s'.[1] From a social policy perspective, this period began with the 1969 summit in The Hague, at which heads of state and government declared an unprecedented level of support for a genuine social dimension to the Community project alongside its economic dimension.

The briefing explores the Parliament's socio-political activism up to the first direct elections in 1979 and beyond. Whereas the elections did not fundamentally alter the Parliament's established routines of parliamentary work or the positions that MEPs promoted in the field of social policy, they changed the nature of the Parliament's interventions in Community social policy-making quite significantly. After 1979, the Parliament's social policy-making became much more reactive and dependent on Commission proposals, especially following the extension of Community competences and parliamentary powers in the SEA, and their work also became more politicised.

Figure 1 – Poster published by the European Commission and Parliament for the 1979 European Parliament elections

Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

By shedding light on the Parliament's involvement in the European Community's first social action programme in 1973 and exploring dominant patterns of MEPs' activism in the field, the briefing demonstrates that the 'long 1970s' set the course for the Parliament's interventions in Community social policy up to the present. The institutional strategies and political positions that MEPs developed and solidified at the time can be traced in the Parliament's social policy-making throughout the following decades.

Based on its activism during the 'long 1970s', the Parliament became a norm-setter in European social policy, mainly by MEPs promoting concrete measures and minimum standards, in contrast to the often vague and general social agenda of the Council, and to some – albeit a lesser – extent the Commission. The Parliament's political groups, a select number of committees and individual MEPs invested heavily in shaping the origins of Community social policy. These different actors sought to make their voices heard and their views count through interinstitutional relations within the Community, by promoting their socio-political aims within the emerging multi-level governance system, and by establishing links with organised societal actors and citizens.

The 1973 social action programme

Until the 1970s, the majority of Member States were keen to retain as much national decision-making power as possible in the field of social policy. As a consequence, European Parliament motions for Community action in the field were more likely to succeed if they contributed to a pre-existing Commission proposal, rather than being in the form of an own-initiative report. Indeed, in their pursuit of socio-political aims, MEPs typically depended on at least some form of draft proposal, which they could then try to amend and extend in its scope and particularities.

This is why the Community's first social action programme (SAP) was of such importance for MEPs' socio-political endeavours. During the 1972 Paris Summit, the governments of the Community's Member States charged the Commission with developing a proposal for a first Community SAP. This decision represented the culmination of a gradual change in Member States' attitudes towards the need for a genuine social dimension to integration. The Commission submitted its proposal for the SAP to the Council and the European Parliament in October 1973.[2] The final version was preceded by an unprecedented intensive six-month consultation among the Community institutions, which opened the door for the Parliament's involvement. During this process, the Commissioner holding the social affairs portfolio – Irishman Patrick Hillery – proactively sought out MEPs' input, notably in exchanges with the Committee on Social Affairs and Employment and the political groups.[3] This consultation process offered various avenues for MEPs to try and shape what was intended to be, according to the Commission, 'the basis for […] the implementation of the first phase of European Social Union.'[4]

Given the Parliament's weak formal role in the legislative process, influencing the Commission draft before its submission to the Council as an official proposal became an important tool in MEPs' hands to exert influence. Among other changes, MEPs succeeded in introducing in the SAP a stronger commitment for Community action in favour of persons with disabilities. According to Irish Fine Gael MEP Charles McDonald, who was among the group of particularly socio-politically active Members from 1973 to 1979, this commitment to more extensive social support for persons with disabilities beyond questions of their employability was entered into the later SAP based on his group's activism.

Figure 2 – Charles McDonald in Strasbourg, May 1976

Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

Specifically, Commissioner Hillery consulted his fellow countryman McDonald and the other Irish MEPs belonging to the Christian Democratic (CD) group, because 'he needed the Christian democrat support [as the largest group in the Parliament until 1975] to get [his draft SAP] through'. As head of the Irish delegation, McDonald took Hillery's ideas for the SAP to the CD group, where they were discussed, and then went back with the group's reaction to Hillery to brief him on its position. Hillery subsequently 'came back and addressed the group. And then, when he went to Parliament, all our amendments were accepted'.[5] Indeed, the adopted SAP contained the long-term objective of 'a wide programme of specific actions to improve the chances of social integration of all handicapped people'.[6]

However, the Parliament's influence on the SAP had its limits. During the plenary of 10 December 1973, the Parliament debated an extensive and detailed resolution on the SAP.[7] The resolution was almost unanimously adopted, with the exception of a number of Communist MEPs, who abstained.[8] Yet, subsequently the Council chose not to adopt the majority of amendments contained in the resolution. Among these failed amendments were calls for measures supporting women to reconcile job aspirations and family responsibilities, pilot schemes for low-cost housing for third-country migrant workers, the upward harmonisation of minimum wages across the Member States, the establishment of a European Labour Office, and action towards a Community social security system.

At the same time, some of the Parliament's proposals indicate that the SAP became quite important for its larger role as socio-political norm-setter. Overall, the drafting and negotiation process had made it easier for MEPs to promote aims that had been part of the Parliament's socio-political and institutional agenda for some time – beyond the scope set for the SAP by the Commission. By opening the larger debate over the Community's future social dimension, the SAP drafting process provided MEPs with a wide range of opportunities to advance a broader set of proposals for political action. Measures that the Parliament had asked for repeatedly in the past were now inserted in the Community policy-making process in conjunction with the SAP.

This concerned, for example, the issues of harmonised maternity benefits, which had been on the Parliament's agenda since the 1960s, and special European Social Fund assistance for women over the age of 35 wishing to (re-)enter the labour market. Even though neither of these two objectives made it into the final SAP or Council resolution, the two adopted texts did include equality-related provisions going beyond the narrow limits of Article 119 of the 1957 EEC Treaty – which merely provided for equal pay for men and women – such as equal access to education and equal working conditions.

In a range of other examples, the SAP extended the scope of the Community's social dimension in directions previously promoted by the Parliament for years. Beyond the above-mentioned provisions for persons with disabilities, the SAP envisaged measures specifically directed at young people – a target group that MEPs had prioritised since the 1950s as future active supporters of the integration project.

Of course, the Commission did not broaden the Community's social agenda exclusively on the basis of the Parliament's previous proposals and demands. Concerns about the socio-economic challenges following the first oil crisis in 1973, the strength of socialist parties in the 1970s, and the relatively strong influence of trade unions at the time all played a role. In addition to this contemporary context, the intensive interinstitutional collaboration of the Parliament and the Commission since the 1950s, as well as the Commission's gradually growing openness to the Parliament's demands in this field, were likely important factors contributing to the Community's social dimension through the SAP.

The contemporary context of the 'long 1970s' not only facilitated the SAP's adoption – it later hindered its full implementation, too. Many of the ambitious initiatives for a strengthened Community social dimension faltered in the face of economic and financial crises as well as pressures from globalisation and technological change. At the time when the nine governments commissioned the SAP, and when it was drafted, unemployment was at an average of 2 % throughout the European Community, and Member States' economies had experienced more than two decades of consistent economic growth. However, towards the end of the drafting process, and particularly during the phase of the SAP's implementation, the Community was hit by a global economic and financial crisis, compounded by international political insecurity in the wake of the 1971 collapse of the Bretton Woods system and the 1973 Yom Kippur War and first oil shock.[9] In the face of such ruptures, short-term crisis management marginalised lofty ambitions for a redefined and extended Community social dimension that had seemed possible and desirable in calmer and more prosperous times.

Delayed, stalled or entirely dropped legislative projects stemming from the SAP limited interinstitutional possibilities for the Parliament to intervene in its aftermath. Despite these limits, however, the programme had a noteworthy long-term impact. Its drafting phase was, in essence, a clean slate on which political actors – including MEPs – could sketch their ideas for a social Europe. For an institution like the European Parliament, with no formal power of initiative or decision-making on legislation, the drafting process created a rare opportunity to influence the Community's social agenda. The Parliament's lasting impact can be traced in the SAP's (albeit gradual) implementation – both in the short term, as in the form of the 1974 Community action programme for the vocational rehabilitation of persons with disabilities,[10] and in the long term, as in the form of a 1992 Council directive on maternity protection.[11] Generally, as the Socialist group claimed, the Parliament's involvement contributed to the SAP's long-term significance by 'propos[ing] measures beyond the employment field and introduc[ing] for the first time an element of Community involvement in areas of broader social concern'.[12]

European Parliament strategies for socio-political activism

From the beginnings of the European Community, several MEPs saw a need for a genuine social dimension to the integration project. The group of MEPs who were engaged strongly in the field before 1979 was typically limited to roughly two dozen members of the Committee on Social Affairs and Employment and the Committee on Cultural Affairs and Youth. Another dozen MEPs occasionally intervened in the Parliament's socio-political debates, notably on issues close to their home constituencies, their national parties or personal fields of activity prior to or besides their dual mandate, including activities in trade unions and transnational political and youth networks. Considering that the overall number of MEPs was 142 (and 198 following the 1973 enlargement), and the relative lack of importance of social policy in terms of Community competences and activities, with associated low expectations of actual impact and political gains, three dozen engaged MEPs was nevertheless a significant group.

When examining the Parliament's socio-political activism during the 'long 1970s', it is important to keep in mind that it was no longer the same actor that it had been in the 1950s. While the Parliament faced significant difficulties in its socio-political action in this policy field in more and more adverse circumstances, as the economic and financial crisis unfolded, it gradually standardised and formalised its parliamentary working practices. In essence, the Parliament progressively transformed from an assembly to a parliament not just in name, but also in substance. In the course of this transformation, MEPs developed a variety of strategies for influencing Community social policy beyond their formal involvement through consultation of official Commission proposals.

Figure 3 – Horst Seefeld during a session in Luxembourg, September 1978

Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

Among MEPs' most successful strategies were their attempts at shaping such proposals at the drafting stage. After all, once a draft text was submitted to the Council, and discussed among the Member States as well as among various Community institutions, the room for manoeuvre to introduce changes was significantly limited. Given the Commission's genuine openness to parliamentary input at the drafting stage, the two institutions' generally very good and close interinstitutional relations and their shared fundamental attitude that the Community needed a stronger social dimension, the Parliament's involvement at the drafting stage created significant scope for MEPs to influence the process.

Moreover, with the 1970 Luxembourg Treaty and the 1975 Brussels Treaty, the Parliament gained proper budgetary powers. Henceforth, it could not only amend, but also reject the Community budget. In addition, the new budgetary procedure included the possibility of a conciliation procedure between the Parliament and the Council in case of disagreement between the two institutions. With some success, the Parliament pursued socio-political legislative objectives by threatening to resort to a conciliation procedure, which would delay the legislation and put pressure on the Council to accept at least some of the Parliament's demands. In a less confrontational manner, the Parliament's new budgetary muscle allowed MEPs to 'shift percentages [in budgetary allocation] for different policy areas', as German Social Democrat Horst Seefeld has recalled. Socio-politically engaged MEPs thus sought to extend the Community's social action, not least by allocating it a bigger share of the Community budget.

Beyond a merely reactive role, the Parliament also tried repeatedly to induce the Commission, which alone had the formal power of initiative, to develop a social policy proposal. It did so via own-initiative reports and resolutions, parliamentary questions and informal contacts with members of the Commission, notably through political groups and committees with whom Commissioners and Commission staff were in regular exchange. In this way, MEPs could try to put items on the Commission's agenda, and point out the need for Community intervention.

When using these tools, the Parliament was not always unified. In fact, the Parliament's work in social policy was characterised by important cleavages. The most significant of these was the cleavage between MEPs who considered the investment of time and effort in the extension of the Community's social dimension worthwhile, and those who did not. The latter's position was motivated by a variety of reasons – for example, because they considered other policy fields more important and conducive to their political careers, or because they did not invest much time in their European part-time mandate at all.

The second cleavage emerged at committee level. The Committee on Social Affairs and Employment was not the only one involved in social policy-making; others included the Committee on Cultural Affairs and Youth, as well as – although to a lesser extent – the Political Affairs Committee and the Committee on Budgets, who mainly shaped the Parliament's positioning on socio-political issues. Among these, the Committee on Budgets tended to hold back what it saw as overly ambitious attempts by the other three to expand Community social policy if it considered their demands insufficiently concrete or simply unrealistic, notably regarding their budgetary feasibility.

Figure 4 – Astrid Lulling speaking in the hemicycle, June 1967

Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

Lastly, the Parliament's different political groups also sought to leave a mark on Community social policy. While they represented a large bandwidth of political positions, in social policy these inter-group differences were not as evident or impactful as the differences between committees. One major factor lay in the self-selection of socio-politically active MEPs. Most national parliamentarians who took on the dual mandate and became engaged at Community level, particularly those who chose to invest time and effort in the field of social policy, did so based on a pro-integrationist conviction, which underpinned their general support for a deeper and wider social dimension to the Community.

In addition, the ideological divide between the political groups on social questions was not as wide during the 1970s as it gradually became after the first direct elections. This was the case not least because the CD group had a somewhat more leftist identity and socio-political positioning than some national Christian Democratic parties. Its identity resulted from the centre-left profile of the CD group's Dutch and Italian parties in particular, and from the political impact of Catholic social teaching on some CD MEPs with a strong interest in social policy.[13] Moreover, the vast majority of MEPs from the Communist group, who actively engaged with the policy field, generally supported more social intervention by the Community – contrary to the French Communists in particular, who continued to oppose the European Community overall as a capitalist construction.[14] Generally, the scope of Community social policy was so limited at the time that 'there was much more to gain […] which is why social policy was not a very controversial issue [within the European Parliament]', as the Luxembourg Socialist (later Christian Democrat) MEP Astrid Lulling has recalled.[15]

Figure 5 – Maria Luisa Cassanmagnago Cerretti speaking at the Committee on Social Affairs and Employment

Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

Regardless of their individual positions and socio-political preferences, the social policy field constituted an important opportunity for MEPs to reach out to citizens and to 'bring home the European ideal', as Italian Christian Democrat Maria Luisa Cassanmagnago Cerretti put it during a 1979 plenary debate on a Commission proposal for a second joint exchange programme for young workers within the Community.[16]

Many of the socio-political initiatives that MEPs got involved in had their roots in concrete issues arising in their own constituencies or home regions. MEPs' pursuit of a genuine Community social dimension was consequently more than a lofty ambition. Rather, it was part of the larger aim to build a European Union of sorts.

A number of MEPs understood their dual mandate as providing them with an additional level to pursue political objectives, which they held more or less independently from their Community-level engagement. This shows not least in frequent references by MEPs to their home cities, regions, or constituencies when outlining specific needs for Community socio-political intervention – references that could similarly function as justification directed at their constituents for the added value of the time MEPs spent away from their constituencies and national parliaments.

After all, MEPs' ambition for the Parliament to act as the voice and representative of the people required the people to know of and about their supposed representative. Increasing such knowledge could not be achieved via the MEPs' constituency work alone. As a result, they, together with the Parliament's administration, sought to promote the institution as well as their individual work in various media.

MEPs' outreach attempts were facilitated if they could work with media with an inherent interest in their specific area of parliamentary engagement, either because of regional affiliation, ideological proximity or political group affiliation. Even if the respective media coverage was not meant to focus on a social policy theme, some MEPs sought to introduce social issues when journalists were present for other reasons. After all, social policy had the potential to demonstrate the Community's added value and the Parliament's work for its citizens. In a similar vein, MEPs used their own visits and public speeches to promote their socio-political positions and demands.

Making a European social dimension a tangible reality

During the 'long 1970s' – years of subsiding growth and intensifying globalisation, of economic and financial crisis and social unrest – MEPs fought fervently for a deepening and widening of the European Community's social dimension. Extending the Community's social policy would make it future-proof by strengthening its connection to its citizens. At the same time, this form of intensive activism aspired to strengthen the Parliament's status as the people's representative in Community politics.

The importance accorded to social policy was not new in the 1970s. MEPs had pursued socio-political integration for the same reasons since the 1950s. Similarly, the Parliament's social policy trajectory did not suddenly change after 1979. Indeed, similar rhetoric can be found in Parliament documents well into the 1980s, and even up to the present.[17] Nevertheless, the 'long 1970s' constituted a key phase, shaping the Parliament's involvement in and impact on European social policy over the long term.

These years of global socio-economic change coincided with the Parliament's professionalisation, which had already started before its direct election. For social policy, this meant that MEPs were not only offered various opportunities to promote social action, in the light of emerging needs for socio-political intervention, but also that they further enhanced the institutional and political tools available to them to grasp these opportunities. For instance, they extended the Parliament's influence via formal consultation, expanded their political impact via the budgetary process based on the 1970 and 1975 budget treaties, and made use of informal interinstitutional contacts with the Commission, the Council and also national governments and political parties.

Even today, MEPs continue to emphasise the importance of connecting the integration project with its citizens, not least through a stronger European social dimension.[18] The Parliament's activism in this field has partly been facilitated by treaty changes, starting with the SEA, which first expanded its influence on social legislation. In the 2000s, however, the Parliament faced a setback in its socio-political ambitions as Member States decided to resort to the open method of coordination (OMC) for tackling an increasing number of social issues, based on persisting government reluctance towards socio-political integration.[19] The OMC provides for virtually no involvement of the Parliament, thus leaving MEPs once more in a position to try and protest, argue or strategise their way into influencing EU and Member State policy on social issues.

This development has not stopped MEPs from pushing various ideas for a more social Europe, however – sometimes across decades, as in the case of higher standards of maternity protection, or the transferability of social and health insurance benefits throughout the European Community/EU that the Parliament has promoted since the period of the dual mandate.[20] Importantly, MEPs have continued to mould their social ideas into specific calls for binding and implementable action – more so indeed than many Council positions and even Commission proposals. The 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) is a recent case in point. In contrast to the Commission's proposal for a mere reference framework of social principles and rights, the Parliament's resolution on the EPSR contained calls for concrete and binding EU action.[21] MEPs acquired and consolidated the necessary expertise, strategic positioning and institutional self-confidence for such activism during the 'long 1970s'. Their activist skills, alongside the Parliament's successful long-term norm and agenda setting in European social policy, may well be the main enduring legacy of the institution's involvement in Community social policy during the 'long 1970s'. Without MEPs' activism in this period, the social dimension of today's EU would likely be less concrete, less tangible, and less binding.

ENDNOTES

[1] The 'long 1970s', in socio-economic terms, lasted from the new social movements in the late 1960s and the 1973 oil crisis through to the reforms and transformation in the 1980s. Institutionally, it began with the 1969 summit in The Hague and extended beyond the 1979 direct elections to the European Parliament, which were far from a 'zero hour' for Parliament, let alone the European Community.

[2] European Commission, Social action programme, COM(73)1600, 24 October 1973.

[3] Written Question No. 530/73 by Hans Edgar Jahn to the Commission of the European Communities, 27 November 1973, OJ C12, 9 February 1974, p. 81.

[4] European Commission, Guidelines for a social action programme (presented by the Commission to the Council on 19 April 1973), Bulletin of the European Communities, Supplement 4/73, p. 5.

[5] Interview by the author with Charles McDonald, Dublin, 14 February 2017.

[6] European Commission, Social Action Programme, p. 16.

[7] Resolution on the Social Action Programme submitted by the Commission of the European Communities to the Council, 10 December 1973, HAEP.

[8] A. Scholtes, 'Sauver au moins l'Europe sociale', Luxemburger Wort, 27 April 1974, p. 22.

[9] See, for example: L. Warlouzet, Governing Europe in a Globalizing World: Neoliberalism and its Alternatives following the 1973 Oil Crisis, Routledge, 2018; I. Cassiers, Le contexte économique: De l'âge d'or à la longue crise, in É. Bussière, M. Dumoulin and S. Schirmann (eds.), Milieux économiques et intégration européenne au XXe siècle: La crise des années 1970 de la Conférence de la Haye à la veille de la relance des années 1980, P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2006, pp. 13-32; A. Varsori and L. Mechi, At the origins of the European structural policy: The Community's social and regional policies from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, in J. van der Harst (ed.), Beyond the Customs Union: The European Community's Quest for Deepening, Widening and Completion, 1969-1975, Nomos, 2007, pp. 223-250.

[10] Council Resolution of 27 June 1974 establishing the initial Community action programme for the vocational rehabilitation of handicapped persons, OJ C80, 9 July 1974, pp. 30-32.

[11] Council Directive 92/85/EEC of 19 October 1992 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding, OJ L348, 28 November 1992, pp. 1-7.

[12] Socialist Group, Note for the attention of members of the Socialist Group, 23 January 1979, p. 3 (p. 370 of the source PDF); final version likely not preserved.

[13] W. Kaiser, Shaping institutions and policies: The EPP Group in the European Communities, in L. Bardi et al., The European Ambition: The Group of the European People's Party and European Integration, Nomos, 2020, pp. 23-88.

[14] M. Roos, The Parliamentary Roots of European Social Policy: Turning Talk into Power, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

[15] Interview by the author with Astrid Lulling, Schifflange, 30 September 2015.

[16] European Parliament, Minutes of the plenary debate on 23 April 1979, HAEP, p. 16.

[17] M. Roos, A Parliament for the People? – The European Parliament's Activism in the Area of Social Policy from the early 1970s to the Single European Act, Journal of European Integration History, 27 (1), 2021, pp. 37-56.

[18] F. Corti, The Politicisation of Social Europe: Conflict Dynamics and Welfare Integration, Edward Elgar, 2022.

[19] L. Hantrais, Social policy in the European Union, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

[20] M. Roos, The Parliamentary Roots of European Social Policy: Turning Talk into Power, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 137.

[21] P. Vesan and F. Corti, New Tensions over Social Europe? The European Pillar of Social Rights and the Debate within the European Parliament, Journal of Common Market Studies, 57 (5), 2019, pp. 977-994.

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