

THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Peter Lynch

INTRODUCTION

The Scottish National Party has been represented in the European Parliament since the mid-1970s. In the pre-1979 unelected parliament the party received an MEP because of its strength at Westminster, but since direct elections in 1979 the SNP has consistently elected a representative to the parliament and it managed to send a second member to Strasbourg in 1994. On taking their seats in the parliament, these MEPs have been faced with a rather different institutional situation than experienced at Westminster - namely the need to form partnerships with other political parties to gain political status and financial resources in the parliament.

The SNP has consistently experienced difficulties in finding suitable and stable political allies in the European Parliament. Since 1979, the party has progressed through membership of the European Progressive Democrats, renamed the European Democratic Alliance, between 1979 and 1989, and the Rainbow Group between 1989 and 1994. Following the European elections of 1994 the SNP has played a part in establishing a third political group, the European Radical Alliance, with MEPs from Bernard Tapie's Energie Radical, the Flemish Volksunie, the Azores Party and the Italian Radical Party. This combination of political parties may seem a very peculiar one for the SNP but it does point to three central problems for the party in the European Parliament. First, the party has few natural allies in the European Parliament as there are relatively few parties supporting self-determination and independence. Second, even relatively compatible parties such as the

Peter Lynch is a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Stirling.

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regionalists have not been an adequate base for a parliamentary group at the European level. Third, because of these problems the SNP has experienced long-term problems in maintaining stable political alliances and avoiding some level of political embarrassment resulting from its limited choice of partners in the European Parliament.

The SNP's problems in the European Parliament stem from a number of constraints over group formation and activity within the parliament. Most obviously, the SNP is explicitly excluded from a number of groups because its political competitors in Scotland are already members. Second, politically and ideologically, the SNP is unsuited to join a large number of groups in the parliament, and unwilling to associate with others for good reasons. In addition the changing rules of group formation in the parliament have not done the SNP or other small parties any favours. In 1989 a political group could only be formed with a minimum of 12 MEPs from at least three countries (European Parliament 1992); by 1994 that minimum was extended to 13 MEPs from at least four member states .

Given such rules and constraints, the SNP has usually been in the position of considering a very limited range of group options. The reality of the SNP's position is that it has continually had to engage in parliamentary alliances with parties with which it has little in common. This fact tends to make the SNP's alliances appear merely as marriages of convenience, though that would be an oversimplification. Whilst the SNP's partners in the European Parliament have been far from perfect, they have not been chosen at random. Group formation is a process of negotiation, and allies have to have something in common to sustain the group itself. Over time, the individual MEPs in the group also come to develop links and common concerns, something which was evident in the SNP's links with Fianna Fail in the European Parliament in the 1980s.

POLITICAL GROUPS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Political groups are one of the key components of the European Parliament. The parliament is structured to encourage the establishment of cross-national political groups through a range of procedural and financial carrots and sticks which are intended to play a role in motivating parties to align with transnational interests and forces, rather than acting merely as national representatives. Thus groups are intended and required to involve members from a number of countries, most of which follow ideological lines - the

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Socialist group and Christian Democrat group in the European Parliament - as well as a range of other political groups which reflect traditional cleavages, ideologies and alignments. The groups themselves are formally recognised within the institutional structure of the parliament, and the parties receive financial support and political status if they are members of a group (Jacobs and Corbett 1990).

The parliament's rules ensure that the benefits of joining a political group substantially outweigh the costs. Although there has always been a small number of independent MEPs in the parliament - currently 27 out of 567 MEPs - there are few attractions in remaining aloof from the political groups. The independent MEPs experience difficulties in gaining speaking time in the parliament's plenary sessions in Strasbourg, find problems in getting places on the parliament's committees, and are not treated favourably with the parliament's resources or finances. All of these benefits are available to political groups, and it is advisable for parties and MEPs to join up with a group in order to gain them (European Parliament 1989, pp.118-9).

For most parties membership of a political group is an uncomplicated process. Most parties have some ideological affinity with the main European party families, and find it relatively simple to sign up with an appropriate group. Thus, from the UK, Labour and the SDLP from Northern Ireland are members of the Socialist Group, the Liberal Democrats are members of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Group, and the Green parties have their own political group. The only anomaly has involved the Conservative Party, which was previously involved in a group with a couple of Danish Conservative MEPs but is now a member of the European Peoples Party, comprising Christian Democratic parties.

The perennial problem for the SNP is to find a suitable set of allies with which to establish a political group. In an ideal world, the nationalists would look to similar organisations that support self-determination as the basis of any political group. However, this has seldom been a realistic prospect. The long-term electoral weakness of regionalist parties, and the general inability of regionalists and minority nationalists to coalesce into a political group, has led the SNP to cultivate alternative allies in order to attain the benefits of group membership and avoid the parliamentary isolation of the independent MEPs.

The fact that the SNP has formed parliamentary alliances with parties which are different from its political agenda and outlook has meant that the party

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has had a very different experience from other parties in the European Parliament. Labour and the Liberal Democrats have been involved in political groups which comprised relatively similar political parties. The common viewpoints and policy preferences of members of the Socialist group and the Liberal Democratic and Reform group enabled these groups to develop common party platforms and advance a common European manifesto at the 1994 European elections. However, because the SNP has been a member of more politically disparate groups, it has been unable to involve itself in a deeper level of common policy-making in the European Parliament leading to common manifestoes, programmes and election campaigning.

THE SNP AND THE EUROPEAN DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE

Despite a downturn in its political fortunes in 1979, and the result of the referendum on devolution, the SNP was successful in electing a representative to the European Parliament. The new MEP, Winnie Ewing, was faced with the difficulty of selecting a political group for the SNP from a number of unlikely choices, though she was able to exercise considerable autonomy within the party over the issue of group membership. Whilst some regionalist parties such as the Volksunie played a role in the creation of the Technical Co-ordination Group which acted as a representative for small parties and independents, the SNP entered an alliance with the RPR from France and Fianna Fail of Ireland (see table 1). The alliance was known as the European Progressive Democrats from 1979-84 and subsequently became known as the European Democratic Alliance. This alliance was based on an agreement that the group would only remain a parliamentary alliance, with no intention of proceeding to a deeper level of intra-party integration.

Table 1

Membership Of The European Democratic Alliance (1988)

<i>Party</i>	<i>MEPs</i>	<i>Country</i>
RPR	20	France
Fianna Fail	8	Ireland
Independent	1	Greece

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Partido Renovador Democrático	1	Portugal
Scottish National Party	1	UK

Despite the disparate nature of the European Democratic Alliance, relations within the group itself were generally harmonious, largely as a result of its limited ambitions and the close links that developed between the MEPs. The group existed to provide a level of representation and status for its members, rather than to advance common interests or policies or play a role in the process of European integration. There was no joint manifesto or programme, and party members were free to pursue their own interests in the parliament. What the group did provide of course was committee placements and a voice for the SNP alongside two serious parties of government in the European Union. The political kudos of being in the same group as two large, electorally successful parties was highly attractive to the SNP, especially given the fact that the alternative was probably membership of the Technical Co-ordination Group (1979-84) or Rainbow Group (1984-9), comprising much smaller and less successful parties. The size of the European Democratic Alliance was also of use to the SNP, as it enabled the group to negotiate with the other political groups to get Mrs Ewing to become Chair of the parliament's committee on Culture and Youth Affairs from 1984-7.

Intra-group activity in the European Democratic Alliance was aided by the close relationship that built up between Mrs Ewing and the Fianna Fail MEPs, several of whom visited Scotland and attended the SNP's annual conference. SNP office-bearers also attended the Fianna Fail conference in Dublin in 1988. The link with the RPR and Fianna Fail was also helpful in generating financial assistance for the SNP, because the party received some funds from the European Parliament as compensation for its European election campaign (Millar 1986). Such financial support would not have been possible without the party's alliance with the RPR and Fianna Fail, which were able to gain a fair degree of financial assistance through their electoral success at European elections.

Where the relationship with the European Democratic Alliance foundered was not in the European Parliament but through the activities of the RPR in France and its coverage in the Scottish media. The RPR and its allies won the

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1986 legislative elections in France and lurched to the right in government, influenced by the success of the National Front at the elections as well as by the enthusiasm of the interior Minister, Charles Pasqua, to play tough on the issues of crime and immigration. The RPR's performance in government brought considerable problems for the SNP, especially as the Labour Party began to criticise the inconsistency of a left-of-centre SNP in alliance with a party of the right. The political embarrassment caused by the RPR was one contributory factor in the SNP's willingness to look for another political home within the European Parliament. A second factor was the growth of a lobby within the SNP to get the party to align itself with regionalists in the parliament and play a part in establishing a political group composed of nationalist and regionalist parties. The SNP's membership of the European Free Alliance was part of this process, and a step on the road to the SNP's involvement in a regionalist political group.

THE SNP AND THE EUROPEAN FREE ALLIANCE

The European Free Alliance (EFA) was established in the early 1980s by the Flemish Volksunie as a transnational federation for European regionalist parties. The EFA grew throughout the 1980s to gain a membership of 20 parties from a number of countries in the European Union (see table 2). Since its inception, the activities of the EFA have been geared towards achieving a higher level of regionalist representation in the European Parliament, with the intention of establishing a regionalist political group to rival the groups formed by MEPs from the Christian Democratic, Liberal and Socialist parties (Lynch 1994a). This strategy has been constantly frustrated by two factors. The first is the limited electoral success of regionalist parties, which has meant that very few regionalist MEPs have actually been elected. The second is that those regionalist parties which were successful in European elections have been attracted to associate with other political parties in the European Parliament. The Basque Partido Nacionalista Vasco and Catalan Convergencia i Unio, for example, both joined mainstream political groups in the parliament such as the European Peoples Party and the European Liberal Democratic and Reform Group rather than associate with the EFA parties. The decision to join mainstream political groups was largely a result of ideology, and the parties' perceptions of their role in Basque and Catalan societies. Each party saw itself representing Liberalism or Christian Democracy in its region, rather than as a regional party operating in Spain. Despite such setbacks, the EFA has continually sought to boost regionalist representation in the European Parliament in order to transform the

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regionalists from status as an 'embryo' group to an actual political group capable of representing regionalist views in the European Union.

Initially, the SNP ignored the EFA, largely because the party was a member of the European Progressive Democrats/European Democratic Alliance. The SNP did not take the EFA particularly seriously in the early 1980s as there seemed little prospect for the emergence of a regionalist group in the parliament, and it was not prepared to disrupt relations with its partners in the European Progressive Democrats by getting too close to the EFA. From 1979 to 1984 some members of the EFA were grouped into the short-lived Technical Co-operation Group within the parliament, so that relations with the EFA would have occurred across group boundaries, causing some discomfort for the SNP. When the SNP did become involved with the European Free Alliance in 1983, it did so on the explicit understanding that it retained its right to remain as members of the European Progressive Democrats and could decide upon group membership independently of the EFA. The SNP's autonomy within the EFA was further enhanced by the fact that it joined the federation as an observer, not a full member, and retained this status for several years.

Table 2

Membership of the European Free Alliance

<i>Party</i>	<i>Region/Nation</i>
Scottish National Party	Scotland
Plaid Cymru	Wales
Eusko Alkartasuna	Basque Country
Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya	Catalonia
Union Démocratique Bretonne	Brittany
Unione di u Popule Corsu	Corsica
Fryske Nasjonale Partij	Friesland (Netherlands)
Union Valdotaïne	Val d'Aosta (Italy)
Partito Sardo D'Azione	Sardinia (Italy)
Unitat Catalunya	Catalans in France
Vlaams Federalistische Partei	Flemish in France
Volksunie	Flanders

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Partei Deutschsprachiger Belgier	Germanophone Belgium
Parti Alsacien	Alsace (France)
Partido Andalucia	Andalucia (Spain)
Slovenska Narodna Strana	Slovakia
Slovenska Skupnost	Slovenes in Italy
Union für Süd Tirol	South Tyrol (Italy)
Parti Occitan	Languedoc (France)
Lega Nord	Italy (until 1994)

The European elections of 1984 brought an end to the Technical Co-ordination Group, and raised the prospect of SNP participation in a new group which contained regionalist members. However, the negligible performance of regionalist parties in 1984 reduced the prospects of a regionalist group to zero. In its place came the Rainbow Group, a combination of Green and regionalist MEPs, in conjunction with 4 members of the Danish anti-European list. Its regionalist component was limited to 3 MEPs, and the SNP did not see this new group as an attractive proposition. There were some SNP activists who sought to promote the idea of membership of the Rainbow Group in the mid-1980s, but this position was not favoured by the SNP's European representative, Winnie Ewing, and the SNP accepted her preference for remaining a member of the European Democratic Alliance. The SNP only joined the Rainbow Group after it had become dissatisfied with the alliance with the RPR, and the number of regionalists elected to the parliament increased sufficiently to make a regionalist-led group numerically viable.

One of the major problems with the European Free Alliance, and also with the Rainbow Group, was that it did not include some of the main regionalist parties in Western Europe, which were successful in national and European elections. The EFA did not include *Convergencia i Unio*, the main party of Catalonia, *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* from the Basque Country or the *Süd Tirol Volkspartei* from Italy. The parties which it did represent tended to be minor parties which were capable of local electoral representation but had little effect on the national or European stage. This fact tended to undermine the emergence of a regionalist group, though the EFA parties continued to work towards a level of electoral success that would deliver them a separate group in the European Parliament (Lynch 1994b).

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Rather than relying upon its members to achieve electoral success in European elections, the EFA was highly involved in cementing relations between member parties in France, Spain and Italy to promote combined regionalist lists at European elections rather than see regionalist parties fail through competing against each other. However, the EFA remains a federation characterised by weak electoral parties, most of which have been incapable of sustained electoral success in European elections. Despite the EFA's mixed fortunes, the SNP has become permanently involved in the organisation. Though the SNP was initially a somewhat reluctant member of the EFA, it moved closer to the federation in the late 1980s, especially after the party agreed to join the EFA parties in a more regionalist version of the Rainbow Group in 1989. The full integration of the SNP into the European Free Alliance was finally completed in 1991, when Winnie Ewing became the federation's President.

THE SNP IN THE RAINBOW GROUP

The SNP's membership of political groups in the European Parliament was substantially effected by the development of the European Free Alliance and the enhanced performance of regionalist parties at the 1989 European elections. The elections brought forth a second version of the Rainbow Group in the European Parliament (see table 3). The new group was more regionalist, containing 8 MEPs from regionalist and minority nationalist parties, and had been shorn of the bulk of its Green membership which seceded to establish a separate Green group in the parliament. The SNP's membership of the Rainbow Group was a result of the difficulties of remaining in the European Democratic Alliance and the more positive attributes of getting involved with a group of parties which supported self-determination.

The irony was that the SNP was abandoning a relationship with state-nationalists in France and Ireland, which favoured an intergovernmental Europe of nation-states, to become associated in the parliament with parties that favoured regional autonomy and a Europe of the regions. This development occurred at the same time as the SNP was expressing its support for Independence in Europe and opposition to a regionalised Europe (Sillars 1989). However, the level of freedom given to the members of the Rainbow Group followed that of the European Free Alliance and prevented this internal cleavage on autonomy from generating conflict within the group.

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The Rainbow Group was far from being the regionalist political group proposed by the original founders of the European Free Alliance. It remained dependent upon parties outside the regionalist/nationalist tradition in order to establish a group at all, even though it was the largest component of the Rainbow Group. However, the success of nationalist and regionalist parties in 1989 had the effect of enhancing the role of the European Free Alliance and increasing the credibility of the nationalist/regionalist tradition in the European political arena.

The Rainbow Group was to prove a relatively short-lived institution, and the membership of the group was to contribute to its instability and demise. There had always been a degree of controversy over the role of the Lega Nord in the Rainbow Group and the EFA, and the changing political situation in Italy generated major problems for parties involved with these organisations in the period leading up to the European elections of 1994. The fact that the Lega entered a coalition government with Berlusconi's Forza Italia, which included the Neo-Fascist National Alliance, was a considerable embarrassment for the parties associated with the Rainbow Group and EFA. The two organisations were in the process of disentangling themselves from the Lega with minimum political and financial damage to the group, when the issue became subject to press attention in the UK through the decision of Plaid Cymru to take a high-profile approach to the Lega problem by suspending its membership of the European Free Alliance in the early months of 1994.

Table 3

The Membership of the Rainbow Group 1989-94

<i>Party</i>	<i>MEPs</i>	<i>Country</i>
Eusko Alkartasuna/Esquerra Republicana	1	Spain
Folkesbevaegelsen Mod EF	4	Denmark
Independent Fianna Fail	1	Ireland
Independent Grünen	1	Germany
Lega Nord	2	Italy
Partido Andalucia	1	Spain
Partido Renovador Democrático	1	Portugal

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Partito Sardo d'Azione	1	Italy
Scottish National Party	1	UK
Unione di u Popule Corsu	1	France
Volksunie	1	Belgium

Plaid's actions led to criticism of the SNP for remaining within the Rainbow Group and European Free Alliance. However, the SNP's position did not allow it to adopt the same type of response as its Welsh allies. First, Winnie Ewing held the Presidency of the EFA and was therefore involved in discussions over the removal of the Lega. Second, the SNP was also closely involved in the Rainbow Group unlike Plaid Cymru, and this limited its ability and desire to abandon its allies in the group. In the circumstances, the problem of the Lega was something of a seven-day wonder, which fluttered briefly and inconsequently through the European election campaign without doing any great harm to the SNP's electoral performance. The response of the SNP was to attack Labour for its links to an Italian Socialist party which was mired in corruption scandals, and avoid references to the EFA and the Rainbow Group in the party's European election manifesto (SNP 1994).

THE NEW POLITICAL GROUPS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The Rainbow Group ceased to become a viable option for the SNP in the European Parliament in 1994 for a number of reasons. The entry of the Lega Nord into the Italian government effectively stripped the Rainbow Group of 2 MEPs before the election, and removed the prospect of re-forming a group with the Lega (and its 6 new MEPs) after the elections. The raising of the minimum number of MEPs necessary for the formation of a political group to thirteen members from at least four countries was an additional constraint.

The 1994 European elections were also something of a disaster for those regionalist parties which had joined the Rainbow Group in 1989. In Spain, the Partido Andalucia and Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya/Eusko Alkartasuna lists were defeated because of the success of the right-wing Alianzo Populare. In Italy, the joint list between the Partito Sardo d'Azione and Union Valdotaïne which had elected an MEP in 1984 and 1989 was swept aside by Berlusconi's Forza Italia. In France, the success of the

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regionalists in gaining a place on the list of the Greens in 1989 was undermined by conflicts between the two French Green parties, and their inability to elect any members to the European Parliament in 1994.

In addition to the electoral failure of the regionalists, one of the mainstays of both versions of the Rainbow Group (and the pre-existing Technical Co-ordination Group), the Danish anti-European Movement, abandoned the regionalists to join the new anti-Maastricht political group within the European Parliament - the Europe of the Nations Group led by James Goldsmith and Phillipe de Villiers.

For the third time since 1979, the SNP was confronted with the need to join a new political group in circumstances which did not offer a wide choice of potential partners. The collapse of the Rainbow Group meant that the SNP was looking at new partners. There was little prospect of the SNP rejoining its former partners in the European Democratic Alliance, and other political groups were firmly closed to the party. The SNP's response was to seek to establish a new group - the European Radical Alliance - with the remnants of the regionalists within the parliament, along with two parties which didn't really have a place with other groups - Tapie's Energie Radical, which is an electoral list rather than a party, and the Italian Radical Party which had been members of the original Technical Co-ordination Group but later become unaffiliated independents in the parliament (see table 4).

The new European Radical Alliance is based on similar lines to previous groups in which the SNP has been involved. It is intended merely as a parliamentary alliance which allows member parties to retain their autonomy within the group. Equally, in contrast to some other political groups, it does not seek to achieve a level of intra-group integration through establishing common policies and positions; its ambitions are limited to acting as a forum for the individual member parties to play a relatively independent role in the European Parliament. The SNP has already gone some way towards cementing group relations by playing host to a number of MEPs from the European Radical Alliance at the party conference in Inverness in September 1994.

Table 4

Membership of the European Radical Alliance 1994

<i>Party</i>	<i>Number of MEPs</i>	<i>Country</i>
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Energie Radical	13	France
SNP	2	UK
Radical Party	2	Italy
Volksunie	1	Belgium
Azores Party	1	Spain

One of the benefits of the new group is its centre-left orientation. In the late 1980s the SNP sought to promote itself as a party of the centre-left, and this effort has been continued in the 1990s through Alex Salmond's proposals for the SNP to proclaim itself as a social democratic party. The SNP's centre-left role was previously subject to criticism because of the fact that it was involved in a political group with the RPR, and then with a disparate group of regionalists which included the ideologically suspect Lega Nord, which is both a regionalist party and a right-wing populist party (Betz 1994). Membership of the European Radical Alliance certainly makes the SNP's centre-left image more secure, and less vulnerable to attack from its opponents.

CONCLUSION

The SNP has never exactly been spoiled for choice when it came to selecting allies in the European Parliament, and its choice has often brought domestic political problems. The RPR's turn to the right in the late 1980s and the Lega Nord's participation in the Italian government with the National Alliance both created problems for the SNP which made its choice of political group seem a hostage to fortune. Political opponents such as the Scottish Liberal Democrats' Charles Kennedy made much of the SNP's links with the Lega in the months before the 1994 European elections, particularly because the SNP remained in these organisations during the time in which the Lega was expelled from membership (**The Scotsman** 19 March 1994). The Lega is no longer a political problem for the SNP, but has the potential of embarrassing the Liberal Democrats as it is now a partner in the European Liberal Democratic and Reformist Group.

Though the SNP has managed to leave the RPR and Lega Nord behind it, the new political group in which the party is involved is not free from political

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risks. The fact that the new group is centred around Bernard Tapie would suggest that the SNP's role in the European Parliament will not be free from the types of difficulties experienced in the 1980s and early 1990s, especially given Tapie's recent conviction on corruption charges. Equally, the main member of the European Radical Alliance, Energie Radical, is far from a stable organisation. Energie Radical was formed as an alternative list of the Socialist Party in France in order to avoid the decimation of the left in the 1994 European elections. It is difficult to see the list transforming itself into a proper party. At some stage in the future the organisation may reintegrate itself with the French Socialist Party (after its relative success at the 1995 presidential election), a prospect which would leave the SNP high and dry in the European Parliament and in need of yet another political group to bolster its parliamentary position.

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