As I write, different variants of political stalemate exist in all four of the largest EU member states. The German election last September, giving none of the more obvious cross-party alliances a parliamentary majority, resulted in a ‘grand coalition’ which is unlikely to enable effective government and may well compel new elections before the end of its term of office. In Italy, an even closer election brought the defeat of Berlusconi’s right-wing administration, but the centre-left achieved a majority in both houses only with the benefit of the bizarre constitutional changes which Berlusconi had recently introduced to his own expected advantage. The narrow margin in the Senate means that Prodi’s new government will also be precarious.

In France, the old saw about ‘autocracy tempered by insurrection’ received reaffirmation in April with the successful mass protests against the contrat première embauche. Chirac’s standing in the polls is at an all-time low, leaving him a lame duck until the next elections in 2007, while the two leading members of his government, de Villepin and Sarkozy, are at each others’ throats. Finally in Britain, Prime Minister Blair, having announced his retirement before the end of the present parliament, has lost much of his remaining credibility, while his aides and those of his expected successor Brown seem more concerned with their own internecine battles than with the newly resurgent opposition.

This all means that the traditional dominant players in the politics of the EU are demonstrably weakened. The outlook for effective social policy at European level is not encouraging.

Richard Hyman