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Sir Julian Priestley (1950-2017), European Parliament Secretary General, 1997-2007; a case study of a *consequential* senior European Union civil servant

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Abstract

Despite a growing body of academic literature about the European Union's public administration, there is a dearth of studies about the most senior managers in the institutions, the Secretaries-General. Consideration of the rich life of the late Sir Julian Priestley, an influential Secretary-General (SG) of the European Parliament, 1997-2007, demonstrates not only how Secretaries-General can be interesting subjects of study in their own right, but also how such SGs can, through the decisions they take and the policies they champion, be *consequential* for their institutions.

Keywords

European Union administration; Senior officials; Secretaries-General; Julian Priestley

THE DEARTH OF STUDIES ABOUT SENIOR MANAGEMENT AND SECRETARIES-GENERAL

Despite the proliferation of studies about the European civil service, there has been a dearth of studies about managers (Heads of Unit), particularly senior managers (Directors, Directors-General) (see Wille, 2007, for a rare exception), and very little at all about the top managers – the Secretaries-General of the EU institutions. Indeed, there has been no general study – historical, comparative or otherwise and, with two exceptions (Westlake, 1995; Kassim, 2004), there have been no comparative studies of successive Secretaries-General *within* particular institutions.

Emile Noël, the first and longest-serving Secretary-General of the European Commission, has been the subject of a biographical study (Bossuat, 2011). Five years after his retirement, Noël himself wrote a very short treatment of his role (Noël, 1992). David Williamson and Carlo Trojan wrote *vignettes* about their roles in Spence (1997). Julian Priestley wrote an at times fly-on the wall account of *Six Battles That Shaped Europe's Parliament*, but abstracted his own role from his accounts (2008).

To date, however, no Secretary-General of an EU institution has written an autobiographical study about her/his career. Nor, with the major exception of Emile Noël, have there been any studies of a particular Secretary-General. And yet, clearly, top managers of any institution or organisation can, and frequently do, play influential and, at times, decisive roles. As this research note will argue, their decisions and policies, particularly in times of change and/or crisis, can be consequential for their institution and for EU politics more generally.

SIR JULIAN PRIESTLEY (1950-2017), A CASE STUDY

One of the ironies about the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union was that so many British-origin senior European Union civil servants had contributed so much to the European integration process over the years between the UK's accession in 1973 and its departure in 2020. (Westlake, 2020, pp. 115-118) Sir Julian Priestley, who retired as EP Secretary General in 1997, and died on 22 April 2017, was a prime example of this phenomenon. He joined the administration of the European Parliament (EP) in 1973, shortly after the United Kingdom had become a Member State of the then EEC and, over a thirty-four-year career, rose to become EP Secretary-General, 1997-2007. In its obituary, *The Times* pointed out that Priestley's time as Secretary General 'almost exactly corresponded to the UK premiership of Tony Blair.' (*The Times*)

Following on from (Lord) David Williamson's 1987-1997 period as Secretary-General of the European Commission, Priestley's appointment (together with, at a political level, Pauline Green's PES Group presidency (1994-1999) and Graham Watson's ALDE Group presidency (2002-2009) in the European Parliament) did seem to symbolize the way the UK had finally come in from the sceptical cold and become a mainstream player in the EU institutions. (Westlake, 2020, p.117) This proved to be an illusion; the UK voted to leave the European Union in June 2016. Priestley was therefore the last ever British-origin Secretary-General of a major EU institution – David Williamson having been the first.

Priestley had a rare combination of administrative and political talents that would surely still now be passionately harnessed to the pro-European cause, if illness and an untimely death had not cut short his life. Priestley's significance was not only a matter of his nationality. As will be seen, Priestley's appointment, mandate, achievements, and post-mandate achievements were all significant in their own right. In addition, his life provides a case study of what might be termed a *consequential* senior EU civil servant.

Early Promise

Sir Julian Gordon Priestley was born on 26 May 1950, the son of Arthur David Noel Priestley (1908-1977), chief accountant for an Anglo-French car components company, and Patricia, *née* Maynard (1916-2014), a clerical assistant at the time of her marriage. Though the Priestleys were nominally Anglicans, the young Priestley attended a Plymouth Roman Catholic direct grant school where he 'loved the opportunities for debating, political history and drama'. His mother and father were both 'active in the Labour Party and strong, early supporters of Britain being in Europe.' (Priestley blog)

In 1968, Priestley spent a gap year in Paris, with a ring-side view of *les événements*. The following year, he went up to Balliol College, Oxford, to study Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE), admitting he 'spent too much of my time immersed in student politics.' He became chairman of the Oxford University Labour Club in 1970 and was elected to the Standing Committee of the Oxford Union Society in Michaelmas Term of that year. Thereafter, he became 'the dominant figure in the politics of the Union in 1971-72.' (Thomas) He served variously as Secretary, Treasurer and Librarian of the Union and was (unusually) returned unopposed as President for Hilary Term 1972, a feat speaking 'volumes for the strength of his personality and the high quality of his oratory...' (Ibid.)

At the Union, Priestley was deeply engaged on one side of a heated argument about the stewardship of the Union which at one stage led him into an alliance with a fellow PPE-ist from Lady Margaret Hall, Ann Widdecombe. It was, 'a most unlikely cabal – she, the determined, ideologically committed Conservative; he, a middle-of-the road Labourite...' She even visited his parents' house in Plymouth over the Easter vacation in 1971 'to plan tactics' (Kochan, 2000, p.51) Ultimately, he resigned, in controversial circumstances, three days before the end of his term. He embarked on a debating tour of the United States, sponsored by the Oxford Union and the English-Speaking Union; 'two months, sixty debates, each time on a different campus.' He was still very much talked about at Oxford the following year, having achieved the 'triple' of being President of the Union, chair of his party-political club, and chair of the Oxford Committee for Europe, a cross-party organisation which Priestley himself founded in Hilary term 1972. (Corbett, Philip McDonagh)

A Career in the European Parliament

In 1973, shortly after the United Kingdom acceded to the EEC, Priestley began work as the Youth Officer of the UK European Movement and immediately became a leading member of the Young European Left. At that time, the EC institutions had started to recruit British nationals as European civil servants. Priestley's taste for debate led him to apply to the European Parliament (EP). In the second half of 1973 he became a junior EP official, based in Luxembourg. He would remain with the Parliament until his retirement in 2007. The pre-direct elections EP was composed of seconded national parliamentarians. The Labour Party refused to send a delegation until after the UK membership question was resolved by the 1975 referendum and, not for the last time, Priestley found himself balancing loyalty to his party with commitment to his institution and to the EC more generally.

Priestley began as an administrator, and then a principal administrator, with the secretariat of the EP's Committee on Budgets, 1973-83. It was a good place to be, since the Parliament's main powers at that time lay in the budgetary field. The first direct elections to the EP were held in June 1979 and the Parliament immediately flexed its muscles by rejecting the Community's draft 1980 budget. Priestley was intimately involved in this early declaration of the Parliament's intent to be an autonomous political body, working closely with the Dutch Socialist rapporteur, Piet Dankert, in drafting the parliamentary resolution. (Harris)

Priestley meanwhile juggled his career in the Parliament with his growing political ambitions, as allowed under EU civil service rules. In the October 1974 British general election, he stood as the Labour candidate for Plymouth Sutton, losing to the sitting Conservative MP, Alan Clark. In 1974, in Luxembourg, he was elected the President of the Young European Federalists (JEF), serving till 1975. He was active in the youth campaign for 'Britain in Europe' in the June 1975 referendum on continued membership of the European Community. He stood unsuccessfully a second time against Clark in Plymouth Sutton in the May 1979 general election. He stood one last time as a Labour candidate in the June 1983 general election, this time in Plymouth, Devonport, coming third behind the sitting Social Democrat MP, Dr David Owen, and his old Oxford Union sparring partner and erstwhile co-conspirator, Ann Widdecombe, for the Conservatives, and knowing that many of Labour's fervent pro-European voters had defected to the SDP. (*Daily Telegraph*)

A hidden irony was that Priestley knew and had previously liked Owen, who had been a Plymouth Labour MP since 1966, through his father's local Labour Party activities. (Harris) Moreover, the former Foreign Secretary was pro-EC membership at a time when the Labour Party manifesto (on which Priestley, alongside, for example, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, all fought) promised to take the UK out of the Community without a referendum. But, according to Widdecombe's biographer, Priestley could not forgive Owen for betraying the Labour Party, and the result was 'almost tangible hostility' between the two men. (Kochan, 2000, p.92) In any case, Priestley returned bruised and despondent after a third election defeat; 'The political career which had been mapped out for him since Oxford now seemed barred.' (Harley)

In 1983 Priestley met a Luxembourg property advisor, Jean Schons, who became his devoted partner for the next 33 years. Thereafter, having chosen to concentrate on his EU career, Priestley rapidly zig-zagged his way up the parliamentary hierarchy, switching back and forth between administrative, managerial and political positions, speeded along by his considerable political skills, oratorical prowess, commanding voice and patrician bearing. He was Chair of the EP's Staff Committee, 1981-83, a high-profile, 'counter-establishment' position. On his watch, a general strike about conditions for EP staff was organised at a time when Piet Dankert, with whom Priestley had worked on the 1980 budget resolution, was EP President. It was a tribute to Priestley's skills and charm that the two men remained on friendly terms. It was also no doubt Priestley's 'political' status that enabled him to fight in a general election on a manifesto commitment that would otherwise have raised many an eyebrow among his administrative superiors.

The Rise to Senior Management

Priestley was then appointed head of the secretariat for the Parliamentary Committee on Energy, Research and Technology, 1984-87 (his first managerial position), working with the Chair of the Committee, Michel Poniowski, a former French minister of the interior. In parallel, he also served as co-chair, 1985-87, of the committee for reform of the Staff Regulations of Community officials. His abundant skills led to early promotion, with the strong support of the British Conservative President of the Parliament at that time, Henry Plumb, to the position of Director in the Directorate-General for Committees and Delegations, with specific responsibility for budgetary affairs and the single market, 1987-89 (Harley). During this period, Priestley headed a task force on 'Making a Success of the Single European Act' and worked closely with its chair, Lord Plumb. (Donaldson) Meanwhile, back in the UK, the Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, was bringing his party back into the progressive left's pro-European mainstream, of which the European Parliamentary Labour Party was gradually becoming an important part. The 1989 European Parliament elections saw 45 Labour MEPs returned. The now more cohesive and mainstream Labour grouping was a significant force within the EP's Socialist Group, and in 1989, as a reflection of that, Priestley was appointed as Secretary-General of the Group.

It was this high-profile position that, particularly through the European Socialist summits, brought Priestley and his talents to the attention of a wider international audience. In 1994, the newly elected leader of the Labour Party, Tony Blair, approached Priestley 'for consideration as a potential Chief of Staff.' Blair considered him to be 'an ideal candidate, combining the political activist with intimate knowledge of government.' (Blair) Ultimately, Priestley withdrew himself from consideration for a variety of reasons, 'not least his dedication to what he was doing in Brussels.' But also for love. (Corbett, 2018) Blair continued to hold Priestley 'in the highest regard' and believed that, if he had been appointed, 'he would have been a huge success.' (Blair) Priestley was also Peter Mandelson's first choice, the latter describing him as 'politically astute, good with people, and a gifted organiser and manager who had helped Tony on his Europe speech in the leadership campaign.' (Mandelson, 2010, p. 178; see also Campbell, p. 36) It was to no avail.

Instead, in July 1994, Priestley was appointed Head of the private office of the incoming President of the European Parliament, German SPD MEP Klaus Hänsch, a position he occupied until the end of Hänsch's presidency in 1997. 'The appointment,' recalls Hänsch, 'was my choice and decision. I had decided before being elected President, in a clear difference from my predecessors, that I would choose someone to run my private office who came from the Parliament's administration, and not from a national administration – someone not necessarily of my nationality but clearly with political skills. Julian was simply and clearly the best.' (Hänsch) Priestley was expected to move from his previous position because in the 1994 European elections Labour had done so well – winning 62 seats (out of 87) – that it was able to claim the leadership of the Socialist Group and it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to have 'Brits' occupying both of the two top positions.

Pauline Green was duly elected Chair of the Parliamentary Group of the PES and Priestley went to work for Hänsch. The position gave Priestley, 'an additional opportunity to develop his skills to more leading parliamentarians beyond the limits of a political group.' He was appreciated for his team-forming and team-leading skills, Hänsch remembers, 'leading by convincing and encouraging, by boosting the skills of each team member, by engaging colleagues through his own commitment. The excellence of my Priestley-led private office was a cornerstone of the success of my presidency.' (Hänsch)

EP Secretary-General (1997-2007)

As the Hänsch presidency advanced, Priestley became increasingly regarded as the obvious candidate to become the next Secretary-General of the European Parliament itself. So it came to pass, with Priestley appointed Secretary-General in 1997. When Priestley took up the reins, the EP employed some 4,000 officials, split between Brussels and Luxembourg, and held twelve monthly plenary sessions in Strasbourg. With the EP's legislative and political powers being continually extended by the Maastricht (1993), Amsterdam (1997) and Nice (2003) Treaties, and with fresh waves of enlargement (2004, 2007) ahead (with the EC moving from 15 to 27 Member States), it was clear to Priestley that the Parliament's administration would require a complete overhaul to respond to these challenges. He therefore developed, launched and implemented a major reform process, dubbed 'raising the game', which was separate from, but ran in parallel with, the overall 'Kinnock package' for administrative reform of the European Commission and the EU civil service.

One of Priestley's main achievements as Secretary General was to prepare the Parliament for such a massive enlargement, particularly regarding translation and interpretation services. He thus successfully met the 'nightmare challenge of guaranteeing MEPs the right to speak in 21 languages.' (Harley) The decision to cover all languages in that way was, 'a courageous one, but the right one. Today, all the citizens of the European Union can listen to the Parliament's debates and proceedings in their own languages and realising that was very much one of Julian's achievements.' (Welle)

Another aspect of the combination of enlargement and the Parliament's own growing powers, dominant in terms of the time and energy required, was buildings policy. 'He spent an awful amount of time working on incredibly complex negotiations to bring home huge projects both in Brussels and Strasbourg ... it was his main purgatory.' (Clark) As a result, the EP developed a far more serious and professional capacity to handle its growing work. Priestley also worked hard to boost the Parliament's communications capacity. The Parliamentarium in Brussels stands as a testimony to his energies and ambitions in that regard. (Clark) As Secretary General, Priestley also made significant contributions to the speeches of the various EP Presidents with whom he worked, particularly for presentations at European Council meetings, further illustrating his 'uniquely combined political flair and administrative competence.' (Harley)

Priestley's mandate as Secretary General was marked by one other major challenge and reform process; negotiating and establishing a new financial and administrative statute for the Members. It was an issue par excellence to be resolved by MEPs themselves, and not by officials. It was a delicate and extremely sensitive task, which was both completely unavoidable and immensely unpopular. Priestley worked closely with the two EP Presidents, Pat Cox and Josep Borrell, who took on the task, and helped them to push through the reform.

A Rich 'Afterlife'

In 2007, after ten years in the position, Priestley decided to take early retirement. He was appointed Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George (KCMG) in the 2007 Birthday Honours. A succession of speakers took the floor at a Strasbourg farewell event. Clearly, Priestley had commanded respect and affection from across the political spectrum. Indeed, an overlooked aspect of his talents was his ability to work with continental politicians, starting with Michel Poniatowski, then Jean-Pierre Cot, then Klaus Hänsch, and then four Presidents during his time as Secretary General (José Maria Gil Robles, Nicole Fontaine, Pat Cox and Josep Borrell), only one of whom (Borrell) was a fellow socialist.

In retirement, Priestley shared his time between Luxembourg, Brussels, the Belgian coast (Ostend) and southern Spain (Marbella). There was more time for his passions of golf, music, film and reading, but he also rapidly developed a portfolio of positions. He served as Chairman of the Board, European Public Policy Advisors. He served as a Member of the Board, Notre Europe (later the Jacques Delors Institute), of Vote Watch, and of the Scientific Council of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies.

Priestley wrote or co-wrote three studies. The first, *Six Battles that Shaped Europe's Parliament* (2008) contained authoritative accounts of defining episodes in the EP's development, including the dramatic events of March 1999 when, under pressure from the Parliament, the whole of the European Commission resigned. In the second, *European Political Parties: The missing link* (2010), Priestley re-fanned his passion for a truly federal Europe and for the European Parliament. A third, *Europe's Parliament: People, places, politics* (2012), co-authored with Stephen Clark, recounted the personalities and events that had characterised the Parliament in which he had spent all of his working life as an EU official.

Following David Cameron's 2013 Bloomberg speech, with its promise of an in-out referendum, Priestley rediscovered his campaigning zeal, co-founding and chairing a Brussels-based, pro-Remain campaigning group, Pro-Europa. Disappointed by the course of European and Labour politics, Priestley edited a collection of polemical essays, *Our Europe, Not Theirs* (2013). In the same period, he discovered the delights of the social media, both as campaigning platforms and as a pleasant way of strolling down Memory Lane. In 2014, he became special adviser to the German SPD MEP, Martin Schulz, in his ultimately unsuccessful campaign, as the Party of European Socialists' *Spitzenkandidat*

(lead candidate) to become President of the European Commission. Priestley went on to co-author a book, with Nereo Penalver Garcia, based on the experience, *The Making of a European President* (2014). In March 2015, Priestley married his partner of 33 years, Jean Schons. The same day, he requested, and was later granted, Luxembourg nationality as a naturalised citizen (though he maintained his British citizenship).

In 2015-2016, Priestley served as a visiting professor at the College of Europe (Bruges), teaching a popular course on the European Parliament. Ill-health prevented him from continuing his teaching, but it could not prevent him from continuing to communicate. That year, his novel, *'Putsch!'*, subtitled, *'Principle, Ambition, Compromise, Intrigue, Threats, Sex – Well, That's Politics'*, was published, with more than a few autobiographical hints in its pages. Priestley was working on a sequel when he died. He was disillusioned by the Labour Party's lukewarm support for EU membership under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. In December 2016, he began a series of passionate and frequently excoriating blogposts about British and European politics. The first, entitled 'The Delusional Left' was published on 11 December. In the last, 'Macron – The Choice for Europe', published on 29 March 2017, he nailed his colours firmly to the mast less than a month before his own death, and less than twenty-four hours before Macron's first-round victory in the French presidential election.

Ironies and Counterfactuals

Following a long illness, Priestley died in Bad Berka (Thuringia) on 22 April 2017, at the age of 66. His life had been rich in ironies and counter-factuals. What if he had been elected to the Commons in the late 1970s or early 1980s? (Many of his Oxford contemporaries expected to see him become at least a Cabinet minister). What if he had accepted Tony Blair's 1994 invitation to become his chief of staff? How might the Blair administration's EU policy have differed, and what might Priestley have moved on to later? What if the Labour government of the early 2000s had proceeded to a referendum on membership of the single currency, which Blair himself believed could have been winnable? (In the wake of the Labour Party's May 1997 general election victory, it was rumoured that Priestley was invited by 'Number Ten' to head up the campaign for the UK to join the single currency in the referendum that Labour had promised on the issue. The offer, if extended, was not accepted. Subsequently, the Blairite project of sterling joining, in the face of Gordon Brown's opposition, became an ever more distant prospect.) What if Martin Schulz had become President of the European Commission in 2014? How might that have changed the relationship between the EU and David Cameron's government? And what if Priestley had not died prematurely in 2017?

Perhaps the greatest irony was that, within his lifetime, Priestley fought for UK membership of the EEC in the early 1970s, fought for the UK to remain in 1975, fought against David Cameron's 2013 promise of an in-out referendum, and finally saw the UK vote to leave in 2016. Priestley had seen his dream come true, and then seen it shattered. It was a great blow, although Priestley did not become embittered. A second irony was that he, as a British-born civil servant dedicated to parliamentarianism, had done more than most to help transform the relatively toothless European institution he had joined in 1973 into the co-legislative and co-budgetary and political power that the EP is today.

A Consequential Senior EU Civil Servant

Priestley was, it can be argued, a *consequential* senior civil servant in several respects. First, his appointment established what is now, with the exception of the brief (2007-2009) interregnum of Harald Romer, an accepted convention that the EP's Secretary-General should be the 'pick' not only of the numerically largest political group in the Parliament but also, ideally, share the nationality of the largest national contingent within that Group. (Implicit in his departure was the fact that he no longer fulfilled those conditions.) In the same context, Priestley's appointment was part of what was seen as

being an almost inexorable dominance of the Socialists in the European Parliament and led the other main political family, the European People's Party (EPP), to reflect on how that dominance could be overturned (e.g., Welle, 2007) and, ultimately, to the EPP's successful strategy in embracing new sister parties in Central and Eastern Europe, with a view to the enlargements of 2004, 2007 and 2013 (see Martens, 2009).

Second, Priestley recognised, perhaps more than most, the urgent need for the EP to bolster its administrative culture if it were to exploit to the full its growing political, legislative and budgetary powers. His reform package, 'raising the game' was vital in that context. By the time he became SG, the Parliament had been directly-elected for almost twenty years and had made great progress in winning itself further powers. Always ambitious for his institution, Priestley saw that tendencies to inertia and complacency could easily undermine the Parliament's credibility in bidding for the further powers he passionately believed were still necessary.

Third, Priestley understood that full linguistic capacity was vital if the EP were to continue to claim to be the democratic cradle of the EU and he therefore was at great pains to ensure that the Parliament could offer the same linguistic possibilities to all of its members – also after future anticipated enlargements had occurred. This may seem self-evident now, but was by no means guaranteed in 1997 when his mandate began and required a great deal of forward planning in budgetary and administrative terms. Indeed, the EP remains a unique institution in being able to offer all of its members full language 'régimes' (in the jargon) – that is, to be able to speak, listen, and read in their mother tongues in all formal meetings. In contrast, the EU's advisory bodies – the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions – do not have this capacity for all meetings, for example, and have to 'borrow' the buildings of the European Parliament and the European Commission for their plenary sessions.

Fourth, in the general context of a change in the building policy of the EU's institutions, Priestley ensured that the institution's buildings matched up to its ambitions, whether in Brussels, Luxembourg or Strasbourg. This was not just a matter of ensuring that the new buildings coming on stream contained sufficient space and capacity for interpreters' cabins and office space for future new members. There were more arcane, but nonetheless important, details that were bound up in the Parliament's perception of itself as the twin arm of the legislative and budgetary authority, relating to such matters as, for example, the geography of meeting rooms and in particular of the rooms where conciliation committees would meet. Priestley also put great emphasis on generous provision of communication facilities, such as working spaces for journalists and television studios. Through the symbiotic relationship between languages and buildings, the EP is now locked into a permanent expansion process of sorts, even if the number of members remains the same. But it has also safeguarded the democratic principle of equal rights for all languages.

Those, then, are the legacies of the late Sir Julian Priestley – a *consequential* senior European Union civil servant.

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Morag Donaldson, 4 June 2020 (personal assistant to Priestley when Secretary General)

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Geoffrey Harris, 3 June 2020 (Labour Party and EP contemporary)

Philip McDonagh, 4 June (Balliol, OULC and OUS contemporary)

Dietmar Nickel, 3-4 June 2020 (EP and Socialist Group contemporary)

David Thomas, 25 April 2020 (unofficial Oxford Union Society historian)

Klaus Welle, 4 June 2020 (Secretary General, EP, 2009-)

Priestley's website, including his polemical pieces about British and European politics, is still accessible at: online <https://julianpriestley.eu/biography/> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in this entry are from that website.

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