

The Contender

By [Patricia Kelly](#)

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Propelled by his involvement with the French farm unions into European politics, the Gaullist MEP Joseph Daul is the leading contender to replace Hans-Gert Pöttering at the helm of the European Parliament's biggest political group, the centre-right EPP-ED, when Pöttering becomes president of the assembly in January.

A native of Strasbourg and fluent in both French and German, Daul's track record as chairman of the agriculture committee and chairman of the conference of committee chairmen would appear to make him an ideal successor to Pöttering, at least to Franco-German members of the EPP-ED group, who would like to keep the Spaniards away from positions of influence.

Representing the East of France for Jacques Chirac's Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) Daul commands an easy respect among fellow parliament-arians of all political persuasions for his quiet and unassuming style of leadership. During his two terms as an MEP he has gained a reputation for efficiency and for being able to maintain orderly discipline amongst his MEPs, preferring compromise over confrontation.

As the chair of chairs, representing all Parliament's committees, Daul played a major role earlier this year in reform of the so-called comitology system, the network of national committees which oversee legislation implemented by the European Commission. Concerned at the almost non-existent role played by the Parliament, after five months of negotiation MEPs won the right to oppose and block implementing decisions taken by the Commission. The agreement was a major breakthrough for the Parliament, giving it real power of control and the only increase, to date, in its powers this term. Parliament's rapporteur on the deal, UK Labour MEP Richard Corbett, says Daul was focused on obtaining a result and reaching a compromise and, despite their political differences, was easy to get on with and a pleasure to work with.

It is a view echoed by everyone who has any dealings with him. Those who know him, his oldest friends as well as more recent acquaintances, describe him as an extremely nice guy and who is genuinely kind, unassuming, keenly observant and quick to learn.

A bon vivant who enjoys good food and wine in the company of friends, in appearance Daul even manages to look like a farmer, with his portly figure, rosy cheeks and unexcitable demeanour. Underneath is an astute and pragmatic politician whose pet hate is people who do not do their homework on issues that concern him.

A self-made and self-educated man, Daul worked his way up through the ranks of the French farm unions, ending up as president of the National Beef Federation (FNB) during the difficult years of Europe's mad cow disease crisis of the 1990s. The rank and file membership of the FNB has a reputation for being tough and difficult to deal with, but Daul handled them with a firm hand and natural authority. Civil servants at the Parliament who now have the task of negotiating with French farmers bemoan his departure from the scene and still miss his calming influence.

He has had a high profile in the French farming community for years with a first appearance on the Brussels scene in the early 1980s as a member of the European Economic and Social Committee

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campaigning for French farming interests. His current term as an MEP has heightened Daul's public profile beyond the farmers; he is extremely active in his constituency with a reputation for being approachable and someone the voters believe they can trust. He has always played an active part in local politics. He was mayor of Pfettisheim in 1989-2002 until the rules were changed so that he could not be both mayor and an MEP – he is currently deputy-mayor.

At 59, and with five grand-children, Daul still gets his hands dirty on the family farm in Gaec with the help of his wife and son. There is also a grown-up daughter. He drives the farm tractor for relaxation and goes shooting. Born into a large family with a farming background, Daul was supposed to be the son who went to university, but his formal education was cut short by the illness of an older sibling and he was obliged to take over the family smallholding to keep it going. Over the years it has expanded into a 75-hectare farm raising beef, sugar, cereal and, until recently, a bit of tobacco.

A committed pro-European, Daul's non-confrontational approach is said by the French to be typical of the Alsace – a region which has changed nationalities four times in 70 years. Disappointed by his country's rejection of the proposed EU constitution, he is quoted as saying: "I believe that France is not conscious of what it did and I regret it." Commuting by car between Brussels and his native Strasbourg, he is firmly in favour of keeping the Parliament in Strasbourg, arguing that if plenary sessions are relocated to Brussels then the siting of EU agencies elsewhere such as in London, Frankfurt and Parma should be renegotiated. If the 'One Seat' campaign succeeds in getting Parliament to leave Strasbourg, you can be sure that Daul will be at the forefront of horse-trading to secure something else for the city.

Daul is well connected to Chirac and the heart of the French government; Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy has lobbied the EPP-ED to give Daul leadership of the group and he is his government's preferred choice for the job. The fact that he is fluent in German has helped his candidature gain broad support from the group's large German contingent, but even at this late stage his appointment is by no means in the bag. Other contenders are being fielded and the race is opening up. The drawback for Daul in a Parliament that is heavily influenced by new countries with a more open market approach is that a younger generation of MEPs may see him as only too willing to preserve the status quo. A conservative with a small 'c', Daul's respect for tradition may yet see him rejected by the reformists of the group more willing for change and eager to rock the boat. Daul is also at a disadvantage with English emerging as Parliament's lingua franca – his understanding of the English language is limited.

The CV

1947: Born Strasbourg, France

1980-82: Member of European Economic and Social Committee

1989-2002: Mayor of Pfettisheim

1996-99: Chairman of the Meat Group of the Committee of Agricultural Organisations in the EU

1999: MEP

2002:– Deputy-mayor of Pfettisheim

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