

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT LEAVES VOTERS “BEMUSED AND CONFUSED”

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A five to ten year moratorium on further EU constitutional reform should be called after the completion of the next intergovernmental conference, according to a report by two prominent Euro MPs. Nick Clegg and Michiel van Hulten, who are both standing down at next year's elections, claim that the speed of European integration has left voters “bemused or confused”. They argue in *Reforming the European Parliament* that without “clear and visible reform” to make it more accountable, the body will continue to be held in low public esteem and regarded as a “distant, unfamiliar entity”.

While Clegg and Van Hulten blame the “crushing myopia” of national media and political elites for depriving the European Parliament of the attention it deserves, they identify a series of reforms that would make the European more popular and effective.

THE REPORT ARGUES:

- **The mandates of MEPs is not strong, as shown by the respective 25% and 29% turnouts in the UK and Netherlands at the 1999 Euro elections.** Though there is a wider malaise in representative politics, the dilemma is stronger for MEPs because their powers have expanded so rapidly over the last decade.
- **There is insufficient discussion of the values, objectives of EU legislation in the European Parliament and a “cavalier attitude” towards its impact:** MPs who argue on the grounds that the fundamental merits of a proposed law should be questioned are rarely given serious consideration. MEPs regularly table far reaching amendments to EU proposals - often drafted with outside help from industry associations or NGOs.
- **There is an absence of clearly identifiable party-politics in the Parliament with which voters can identify.** MEPs behave in an individualistic manner in without feeling an obligation towards party discipline. The glut of reports, opinions and resolutions produced, leaves a confused picture about where party-groupings stand. Because the loyalties of MEPs remain predominantly towards their own national political parties, the European political groupings don't have political programmes that can be easily understood by the electorate. This confusion is leading to the Parliament becoming indistinguishable from the vague conception most voters have of “Brussels”.
- **Scrutiny of the European Commission is inadequate:** The European Parliament's scrutiny of the European Commission's annual programme remains half-hearted and irresponsible. Instead of scrutinising the Commission's proposals in the light of EU strategic priorities, they tend to add their own personal pet initiatives.
- **The European Parliament gives the impression of not taking its legislative role seriously:** Its decisions can be frivolous and lead to unhelpful media coverage, such as the vote in November 2002 calling for a ban on chocolate

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cigarettes as part of the EU's anti-smoking drive. Absenteeism is widespread: voting sessions in Strasbourg never attract more than 550 out of a membership of 626 – even when taking crucial decisions such as the election of its president.

Recommendations:

The European Parliament must become a better law-making body

- The Parliament should establish an independent impact assessment agency to assess the Parliament's proposals. This would have no right to over-ride the Parliament, but by publishing its findings, would encourage better law making.
- The Parliaments powers should be increase so that it has rights of co-decision in all areas, such as agriculture and fisheries, where the Council decides on legislation by qualified majority. Currently majority voting without co-decision means that decisions can neither be blocked by national Parliaments or the European parliament.
- To avoid bureaucratic burdens, Directives should return to their original function as "framework legislation" which are left to the discretion of member states to refine. Directives should have to be implemented into national law within one year of adoption.

The European Parliament must scrutinise more effectively the European Commission and Council of Ministers:

- The European Parliament should directly elect the President of the European Commission, and the decision should be confirmed in the European Council on the basis of a decision taken by Qualified Majority Voting.
- The European Parliament should be given the right to sack individual commissioners. In 1999 the firing of Edith Cresson might have prevented the entire commission from falling. It should also be given powers to scrutinise those parts of the Council's budget earmarked for an "operational" role.
- The European Parliament should set up a Public Administration Committee to scrutinise the Commission's executive role.

The European Parliament must build closer links with national Parliaments

- National Parliaments should set up a unit to monitor European legislation and maintain relations with the European Parliament.
- National parliaments should involve MEPs more systematically in their work. In several member states, MEPs have the right to attend meetings of the national Parliament: this should be extended, and national MPs should be involved in the confirmation hearings of prospective Commissioners. National MPs should also be involved in the confirmation hearings of prospective commissioners.

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The political positions of those in the European parliament needs to be communicated more clearly

The European Parliament must impose greater internal discipline so that political groupings can set out policy positions if it is to interest Europe's voters. Resources should be shifted from the Parliament and individual MPs to political groups, which would then help communicate recognisable policy positions. The leaders of the Parliament's largest political groups should be invited to attend European Council summits to put across the positions of their groups.

The method of electing MEPs must be reformed

- Member states should voluntarily divide their territories into smaller constituencies to build up a stronger link between MEPs and the electorate. "Closed lists", in which voters express a preference for a political party rather than an individual candidate, should be replaced by a combination of multi-member regional constituencies and an "open list" system.

The European Parliament must become more efficient and transparent

- The "unforgivably lax" travel expenses arrangements for MEPs must be reformed, and the legal limbo in which MEPs assistants are suspended tackled. The spread of the European Parliament over three locations in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg significantly hinders its work is also "impossible to justify" when public expenditure is under pressure. A "standards in public life" committee should also be established to investigate wrongdoing within EU institutions.

Nick Clegg and Michiel van Hulten said:

"The European Parliament must strive to connect with Europe's voters, or risk wielding power without responsibility"

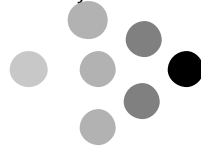
NOTES TO EDI

1. Nick Clegg was elected Liberal Democrat MEP for the East Midlands in June 1999. He is the Trade and Industry Spokesman for the ELDR Group in the European Parliament and author of numerous articles and pamphlets on EU Affairs. Prior to entering the European Parliament he worked as a senior member of the Cabinet of the Vice President of the European Commission as a civil servant, consultant and journalist.
2. Michiel van Hulten was elected as a Member of the European Parliament for the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) in June 1999. He is a member of the Committee on Budgetary Control and a specialist in reform of the European Commission. He previously worked as a policy officer with Netherlands Trade Union Confederation FNV, as a private Secretary to the Dutch education minister and as an official with the EU Council of Ministers.
3. The Foreign Policy Centre is an independent thinktank established in 1998 to revitalise debate about foreign policy.
4. The Next Generation Democracy series is published by the Foreign Policy Centre in association with the British Council.

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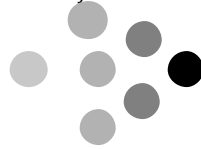
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