

Brexit: The End of British MEPs' Frustrations?

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*Despite the importance of the European Parliament in EU law making, MEPs have typically been marginalised in UK politics, writes **Margherita de Candia**. She argues this attitude on the part of national politicians may have contributed to the UK's decision to leave the EU, and that the remaining Member States should recognise the importance of the parliament in order to foster greater democratic legitimacy for the EU.*

A recurring question since the UK's EU referendum has been: What will happen to British Members of the European Parliament (MEPs)?

According to the EU treaties, MEPs are elected to represent the whole EU citizenry, not just their national constituencies. If we accept this position, then UK MEPs should keep their seats in the European Parliament (EP) until the expiration of its current term, in 2019. We can expect the majority of them to adopt a lower profile, abstaining on matters outside the UK's new remit.

In this regard, UKIP leader Nigel Farage has already affirmed that he won't pack his bags until they 'win the peace'. What is keeping him and the rest of UKIP in the EP hemicycle is certainly not European nostalgia, but the desire to ensure a good new relationship between the UK and the rest of the EU.

Tears will probably accompany the departure of Europhile MEPs from the parliament. Yet, seeing the glass half full and with a bit of cynicism, leaving the EP may finally bring an end to British MEPs' predominant sense of frustration. Conservative and Labour MEPs I met several months ago told me that they have long been frustrated about the way that party colleagues and the media back home treat them.

In truth, Westminster has always considered MEPs to be second-order politicians – people ended up in the European Parliament if they didn't make it in national politics. The European Parliament has always been deemed little more than a weak democratic decoration without real powers, despite its progressive empowerment.

Remarks by one Labour MEP were particularly enlightening in this regard:

I feel totally unappreciated. If there is anything to do with the European Union in terms of legislation, do they have to consult the MEP on that committee? No, you always go to the minister, the shadow minister, the chairman of the European Select Committee or whatever. UK national parties are not interested in what goes on in the EP. MPs don't overall regard other institutions as being as legitimate and as democratic as they are. Westminster is the only thing that really matters.

In a similar vein, one Conservative MEP stated that:

Our MPs think that MEPs, when they say they they've got powers, are just trying to pick themselves up and look important, and try to be more important than they are. But the fact is that MEPs do have a big role, and the UK doesn't punch its weight properly because we don't have as effective links with the national party as MEPs in other countries have. So you've got more powerful, but there is no evidence that they want to know more about us or do more with us. The truth is that there is often more resentment and hostility.

Researching these questions may seem superfluous after the Brexit vote. Why should we care about the position of Britain's MEPs if, after all, they are likely due to leave soon? One reason is that this sort of 'Westminster attitude' to MEPs is not confined to the UK. MEPs in other Member States face similar difficulties. The question then becomes: What impact does this attitude have?

First, the way Westminster that has dealt with the EP does not seem to have been effective. After all, pretending that the European Parliament is just a talking shop and that MEPs are second-order politicians will not bring powers back to national parliaments. Politicians should approach situations as they are, rather than as they wish them to be.

In other words, national parliaments and politicians should finally accept that the EP and MEPs do have powers, and then try to make the most of it. Second, this attitude may be counterproductive – as demonstrated by the fact that the UK has been underrepresented in terms of EU senior staffing.

Third, and probably most relevant, is the negative impact that this approach can have on the legitimacy of the European polity. By neglecting the role and powers of the only directly-elected EU institution, national politicians certainly do not help the EU gain legitimacy *vis-à-vis* citizens. If national party leaders and MPs don't pay attention to the EP and MEPs, why should citizens?

Although the UK has decided to leave the EU, we can still learn from the flaws in its relationship with the EU as a member. In this regard, it is not fanciful to say that this Westminster attitude played its part in the referendum result, by contributing to the development of a biased and uninformed political narrative around the EU.

In EU decision-making, disregarding the role of the EP has not helped it gain legitimacy *vis-à-vis* citizens. Despite increases in its powers, the European Parliament continues to be considered a secondary institution.

This reinforces that power is nothing without acknowledgment. In other words, having a more powerful European Parliament does not help foster EU representative democracy if the institution is not perceived as such. Hopefully, the rest of the EU will learn lessons from what happened on 23 June.

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