

A day in the life of an MEP

by Richard Corbett MEP

Ever wondered who you might find yourself sitting next to on an SN Brussels flight? A member of the Belgian Royal family? An international footballer? The next big star to take Hollywood by storm?...

On a flight from or to Brussels, the person next to you is just as likely to be a Member of the European Parliament, on the way to work or travelling back to the constituency. But how many of us would actually recognise one of these mysterious creatures? Surely they're all stuffy, middle-aged suits, flying first class?

We asked Richard Corbett, MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber and an expert on the workings of the European Parliament, to give us an insight into daily life at the heart of European decision-making...

As you might expect, it's debating and drafting laws that takes up a lot of an MEP's time. But the European Parliament isn't a sexy parliament. Compared with its national counterparts, it lacks the cut and thrust of debate between government and opposition.

And the sheer number of languages used makes the debates far from spectacular. Every official language of every country in the European Union is a working language for the Parliament – and there are 20 of them, since we welcomed ten new eastern European countries into the EU this May.

The interpreters and translators do a fantastic job ensuring that every MEP from every country can follow debates. But sometimes there are hiccups...

For a start, trying to tell a joke in the chamber is always risky. If you're lucky, some people will laugh immediately. Others may chuckle ten seconds later, and by the time you've moved on to make a serious point, the interpretation of your previous remarks causes a third group of MEPs start to laugh – quite unnerving, to say the least!

On top of that, many MEPs like to try their hand at foreign languages themselves – with varying degrees of success. I remember once bumping into a young French lady who'd previously told me that she'd just started working as an assistant to four German MEPs. I decided to strike up a conversation.

I asked her, "Comment ca va avec tes allemands?" ('How is it going with your Germans?') – but she thought I said, "Comment ca va avec tes amants?" ('How is it going with your lovers?').

Her: "What do you mean? I don't have any."

Me: "I thought you had four!"

Her (looking increasingly shocked): "Where did you get that idea?"

Me: "You told me - you said you had four of them. You were looking forward to the challenge. Two of them you didn't know before, but you had heard they were quite nice..."

So, as you relax and enjoy your flight, do spare a thought for those MEPs who jet back and forth from Belgium to the outer reaches of Europe twice a week. Delays, detours and so on soon remove any trace of the supposed glamour of jet setting – although even that can sometimes be a source of amusement...

Glenys Kinnock, the renowned equal rights campaigner, was once approached by an air hostess who thought she might like to know that that the plane's crew, including pilots, was entirely female. Impressed, Glenys asked if she could visit the cockpit.

"Oh, we don't call it that any more," replied the hostess!

Perhaps this article has encouraged you to find out more about the EU or get in touch with your own MEP – they may even have some more anecdotes to share!

And although it's true that the EU has a reputation for being bureaucratic, in fact all its laws are passed by elected governments and MEPs. They are very much more than mere passengers on the gravy plane!

Richard Corbett is a Labour MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber, and the Socialist Group's spokesperson on European constitutional affairs.

Richard is the co-author of the standard textbook on the European Parliament. He also keeps a daily web diary about life in the EU, and collects anecdotes from fellow MEPs. To read more, visit www.corbett-euro.demon.co.uk