

The European Parliament: less sexy, more toothy

The European Parliament was always envisaged as ‘the voice of the citizen’ at the heart of European decision-making – a place which it now holds with pride, as an equal legislative partner with the Council of Ministers.

Parliament strengthens the European Union

The European Parliament has previously had something of a reputation as a ‘toothless talking shop’. The complaint may have been justified 40 years ago, when MEPs were chosen as delegates from national parliaments, rather than being directly elected; or even 20 years ago, when Parliament had no more than a right to an ‘opinion’ over most EU legislation. Today, however, Parliament could hardly be described as lacking teeth.

In fact, the European Parliament is part of what makes the EU radically different from a traditional intergovernmental organisation. Imagine what the EU would be like without it: it would be a system dominated by diplomats and bureaucrats, loosely supervised by ministers flying periodically into Brussels. The existence of a body of full-time representatives in the heart of decision-making, asking questions, knocking on doors, bringing the spotlight to shine in dark corners, and talking to their constituents back home, makes the EU system more open, transparent and democratic than any other international organisation.

MEPs are drawn from governing parties and opposition parties, and they represent not just capital cities but the regions in their full diversity. In short, Parliament brings pluralism into play and makes sure the voice of the citizen is heard loud and clear wherever European decisions are taken.

Parliament also takes the edge off national conflict. Council can all too often give the appearance of decision-taking by gladiatorial combat between those representing ‘national interests’. Reality is more complex, and the fact that the Parliament organises itself not in national delegations but in political groups shows that the dividing line on most subjects isn’t between nations, but between political viewpoints.

MEPs have real clout

In many national parliaments, when a government publishes a bill, it’s usually clear what will come out of the procedure. It makes headline news if a parliament amends a bill against the will of the government. Some people even claim that certain national parliaments are little more than rubber-stamps for their government’s legislation.

But this is certainly not the case in Europe. When it comes to the detail of legislative or budgetary work, individual MEPs shape legislation in a way that MPs simply don’t. National backbenchers and opposition MPs often have very limited power and job satisfaction – apart, perhaps, from the prospect of one day perhaps wielding ministerial authority.

MEPs, on the other hand, play a very significant role in shaping legislation. A draft directive really is a draft – committees of individual MEPs go through it paragraph by paragraph and rewrite it! Every year, thousands of amendments to draft legislation put forward by ordinary ‘backbenchers’ end up on the statute books and apply across the entire EU.

The nature of day-to-day work is also different. A good MP in a national context is someone who is a good debater, able to score points over his or her opponents. But a good MEP is someone who is good at explaining and negotiating with colleagues from 25 different countries, trying to build a majority through compromise and persuasion. This style of working leaves plenty of scope for an active MEP to have a significant impact on the day-to-day running of the EU.

Parliament makes law

EU law is jointly adopted by the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament, effectively forming a bicameral legislature at European level.

Under the co-decision procedure, Council and Parliament are equal partners in adopting new laws. When a proposal comes before Parliament, it can accept, amend or reject the proposal. There are two important points here: firstly, Parliament can give a yes/no verdict over each proposal – and any proposal rejected by Parliament falls there and then. Secondly, Parliament can rewrite each proposal as it sees fit, and if Council fails to agree to these amendments, it must negotiate with Parliament in a ‘conciliation committee’. At the end of the day, if no agreement is reached after a given period of time, the proposal is thrown out.

This procedure applies to the majority of policy areas where the EU has responsibility. But there are still a few areas – primarily agriculture – where the final word on legislation rests with Council. In these areas, the Council is still required to obtain the opinion of Parliament before passing law, but it can ultimately overrule this opinion. With each new treaty, the number of areas subject to this consultation procedure has dwindled.

Parliament supervises the budget

Parliament also has decision-making power in arguably the most important area of all – the EU budget!

It has final say over virtually all budgetary spending (again with the exception of agricultural spending), and final responsibility for monitoring budgetary spending. In setting the budgetary framework, Parliament also has sole power to reject the proposals, a power that it has used twice in the past.

Parliament oversees the Commission

The European Commission is the body responsible for producing first-draft proposals of new EU laws. It also enforces the rules once they’ve been agreed.

Commission members are nominated by national governments, but must subsequently be approved (or rejected) by Parliament. Parliament is then responsible for holding the Commission to account, by asking questions and by summoning Commissioners for cross-examination before Parliamentary committees.

Parliament also has the power to dismiss the Commission.

Parliament represents citizens

Like MPs, MEPs are elected by and responsible to their constituents back home. Without Parliament, the only way an EU citizen could have any influence over European decision-making would be via Foreign Office diplomats or through the doubly indirect method of lobbying a national government. The presence of elected MEPs – accessible to every citizen – makes the EU a more open, democratic and accessible organisation.

Parliament isn’t glamorous

The European Parliament today is undoubtedly powerful, but it’s never been very sexy. Compared to many national parliaments, it lacks the cut and thrust of debate between government and opposition. And parliamentary debates are far from spectacular – mostly because they take place in 20 languages!

The responsibilities of the European Union are also strictly limited. The EU has no say over the key ‘gut issues’ of domestic politics: how we organise our schools and local authorities, our health service, housing, and our levels of income tax, for instance. Only in certain areas of transnational concern – such as commercial law, consumer protection, social rights and the environment – have countries agreed to work together in the EU.

So its strictly limited field of responsibility, combined with its distinctly untheatrical way of going about its business, means that the European Parliament’s media coverage in most countries is far less than its considerable influence deserves.