

The European Parliament an overview

The European Parliament has 751 members. Parliamentarians are elected from the 28 EU member countries and sit in political groups according to their broad political inclinations.

The two largest groups are the European People's Party (centre-right MEPs) and the European Socialists & Democrats (including Labour MEPs).

Like the US Congress, Parliament does most of its work in specialist committees. There are twenty committees, each covering a particular area of EU activity (transport, regional policy, environment, and so on). This allows for detailed scrutiny of draft laws by specialist MEPs.

About the author



Richard Corbett was first elected as a Member of the European Parliament in 1996. He is the Deputy Leader of the Labour MEPs.

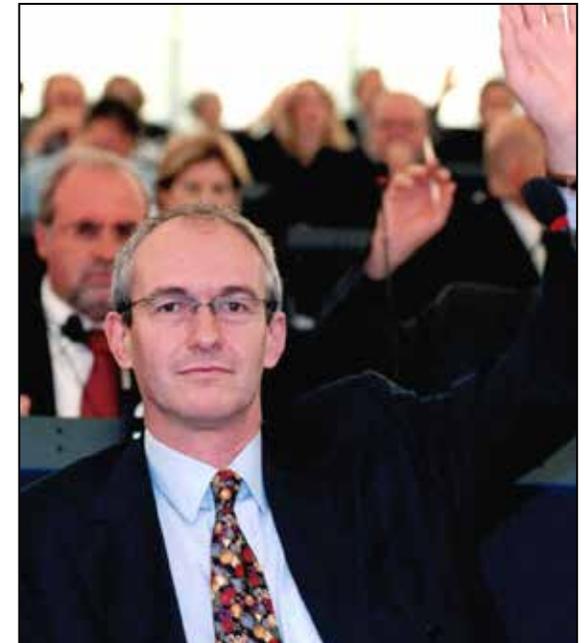
Richard is the co-author of the standard textbook of the European Parliament, now in its eighth edition, as well as several other books on European affairs.



Richard's **Doorstep EU** app provides authoritative briefings as well as up-to-the-minute analysis of media headlines.

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What does an MEP do?



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Your voice in Brussels



Just as you elect councillors to deal with local issues and MPs to deal with national issues, so you elect Members of the European Parliament to deal with European issues.

Your MEP is your voice in Brussels. You don't need to go through Foreign Office diplomats to be represented in the European Union — you have your own representatives for your area.

The UK has decided that its MEPs will come from regional constituencies. The people of Yorkshire & Humber, for instance, elect six MEPs. Elections are every five years by proportional representation, and each party puts up a team of candidates.

A European debate

An MEP's main task is to debate and vote on European issues, just as MPs in the House of Commons debate and vote on national issues. Laws agreed in the European Parliament apply across Europe.

The EU does not legislate in areas that are purely of national concern, such as how we organise our schools, hospitals or health service, or what taxes we pay. But in other areas, we agree some of our laws with our neighbours at European level. This is the case for many rules on consumer protection, environmental standards, economic development, competition policy, safety standards and social rights.

Most of this is about common rules for the common market, to make it work fairly and avoid the bureaucratic nightmare of divergent national rules.

How laws are made

Most European laws are adopted jointly by the European Parliament and the EU Council, which is made up of ministers from all 28 member countries.

Parliament and Council each hold up to three readings of draft legislation. If they cannot agree on the same text, the draft law is scrapped.

We need this detailed scrutiny to make sure that European laws are acceptable to the peoples of Europe, who elect MEPs to represent them.

Brussels bureaucrats

Initial drafts of new laws are proposed (but not decided!) by the European Commission, the famous 'Brussels bureaucrats'. This small body is led by 28 politicians, nominated by elected national governments and approved by MEPs, who also elect its President. They serve for five years, unless they are dismissed early by a vote of no confidence from Parliament.

Part of an MEP's job is to keep tabs on the Commission and the civil servants who work for it. Commissioners and their staff regularly appear before MEPs to be cross-examined and explain what they have been up to.

Holder of the purse-strings

The European Parliament is also in charge of the EU's annual budget. Parliament and national governments agree the budget jointly, but MEPs supervise how it is spent.

Constituents

MEPs receive a lot of requests for help from constituents. Many are to do with EU law, or people who have had difficulties when travelling or working elsewhere in Europe.

Your MEP works closely with MPs, local councillors and the Parliamentary Ombudsman to help find a solution.