

## Democracy for the sake of it?

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*Following the sterling defence of EU democracy [0] by Labour MEP Richard Corbett, **Paul Davies** (formerly of the Electoral Reform Society) takes a closer look at the role of the European Parliament, currently the EU's only democratic institution:*

Ask anyone about the workings of the European Parliament and it's all but certain that you'll be met with a bemused, baffled and downright bored expression. Some may offer a scintilla of insight or blag their way to offering a fuller, albeit highly inaccurate, précis of the Parliament and its position within pan-European politics, but on the whole, no one will have a clue.

So far, so unextraordinary. People's knowledge of politics is, on the whole, risible. Ask anyone about the UK Parliament and answers wouldn't be much stronger, nor any more enthused. However, there are people out there who do understand UK Politics, who can talk about it without rolling along solely in angry and anachronistic arguments about which party is the least useless, who can name their MP, who can distinguish where the main parties differ on key policy issues. There are even some that understand the voting system.

The same cannot be said about the EU, save outside of a few very 'special' Brussels enclaves.

The way MEPs are elected differs across the continent, but as no one outside of the candidates' immediate friends and family can name their MEPs, this arguably doesn't matter a great deal. Once in, the role of these mysterious MEPs is often ambiguous, and scarcely related back to the people that voted them in in the first place. But again, as a majority of votes are cast on the basis of national issues, this arguably doesn't matter too much either.

Furthermore, what little coverage there is outside of reactionary scare stories about the behemoth of EU bureaucracy centring on the many bizarre and sometimes bewilderingly legal ways in which MEPs are corrupt.

All of which can understandably lead one to question just what the European Parliament is all about. The need for laws that apply equally to every member of the EU is clear enough, but a

quick glance at the now seemingly irremediably crippled EU Constitution would suggest that the clarity stops there. In terms of engagement, participation and relevance, is the European Parliament democratic in name only, because holding elections seems like the right thing to do, and because if there were no elections, people would have an even lower opinion of the Parliament than they do now?

Over my next few posts, these questions will be addressed, and more concerning the Parliament's future will inevitably be asked.

After looking at how voting for Members of the European Parliament came about, how it's evolved, why it's done so in such a complex and remote way and what purpose it's supposed to serve when all the obfuscation is cut through, some of these questions may even be answered.

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