

Why the European Parliament should not be abolished

Former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw recently argued forcefully that the European Parliament suffered from an ineradicable 'democratic deficit' and should be abolished, to be replaced by an assembly of national parliaments. Simon Hix argues that the evidence shows that the European Parliament successfully handles a massive policy agenda, and in most countries engages strongly with European citizens. Reforming the way that the UK elects its members of the European Parliament so as to give voters more choice (and parties less control) would best tackle the poor electoral accountability of Britain's MEPs.



At a recent Seminar at the left-of-centre London think tank, the [Institute for Public Research \(IPPR\)](#), the former British foreign minister, Jack Straw called for the abolition of a directly-elected European Parliament. Instead he advocated a return to an indirectly elected assembly, composed of representatives chosen from the 27 national parliaments (the arrangement that applied until 1979). This is not a new idea, but it is certainly a surprise to hear this argument coming from a senior and pro-European British politician – someone who has held top UK Cabinet positions for many years, including being Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary. Straw's comments quickly sparked a flurry of counter-arguments in [the Guardian](#).

I was sharing the platform with Mr Straw at the same IPPR seminar and so immediately made the case that his comments were unfair. The European Parliament is still a very new institution in politico-constitutional terms, and it takes time to create a strong connection between European voters and MEPs. One certainly should not extrapolate from the lack of accountability of MEPs in the UK (where they are little known by the public) to all the other member states. I also said that going back to the pre-1979 model for the European Parliament would make the democratic deficit problem far worse, rather than better.

First, it is easy to forget how ineffectual the previously indirectly elected European Parliament used to be in the 1970s. National MPs are far too busy doing national politics to want to spend much time doing EU politics as well. This was a major problem before 1979, when only second-rate national politicians volunteered for the extra work in Brussels and Strasbourg. It would be much more of a problem now because of the expanded policy agenda of the EU, the extensive legislative powers that the European Parliament now has, and the expansion of the EU's single market and political institutions to cover 27 countries and 500 million citizens.

These days the European

Parliament has to scrutinise and amend 150 to 200 pieces of legislation a year. It oversees an annual budget of more than 120 billion Euros. It monitors the activities of the Commission and its many Directorate-Generals. It interacts regularly with the European Council. MEPs monitor and hold accountable the European Central Bank and all the EU agencies. The Parliament also responds to numerous requests from citizens, interest groups, governments, political parties, journalists, trade associations, industries, trade unions, civil society organizations, and national politicians and civil servants about EU affairs for information; for the opportunity to contribute to policy-setting debates and enquiries; and for help in getting diverse issues and viewpoints onto the EU's many different policy agendas.



Credit: European Parliament (Creative Commons BY-NC-ND)

Table 1 gives a more in-depth look at how the European Parliament performs in comparison with the UK's House of Commons. The first three rows show that the European Parliament passed six times as much legislation as the UK's House of Commons, and held 17 times as many roll call votes. One small indicator of popular regard is that it also received many more Facebook likes than the Commons. However, on other dimensions Westminster MPs asked many more questions of ministers than their European counterparts, and performed more strongly on other social media indices. (Keep in mind too the number of constituents for the European Parliament is eight times greater than for Westminster).

Table 1 – Comparing the activities and performance of the European Parliament and the UK's House of Commons in 2011-12

Indicator of activity or performance	European Parliament	House of Commons
Number of pieces of legislation passed in 2011	152	25
Number of recorded or roll-call votes (for which MPs or MEPs must attend) that took place in 2011	4,259	252
Number of 'Likes' on Facebook, February 2012	366,959	10,204
Number of MEP or MP questions asked to the European Commissioners or to UK Cabinet ministers respectively in 2011	12,579	55,809
Number of followers on Twitter, February 2012	36,415*	64,336
Number of subscribers to EuroparlTV or to UK Parliament TV on YouTube, February 2012	1,990	3,076

*Includes accounts in 22 languages

These indicators are only straws in the wind, and political scientists certainly need to consider how a more comprehensive 'dashboard' of parliamentary activity might be devised. But surely these few numbers already show that it is inconceivable to think that any national MP would have the time, energy or expertise to carry out the Euro-level representative roles any better than the current MEPs. Most MEPs are highly motivated, attending all committee meetings in Brussels and plenary votes in Strasbourg.

Second, MEPs do a pretty good job of holding the governments in Council and the Commission to account, and acting as a brake on policy-making and legislation. Time and time again the European Parliament has improved laws that were poorly drafted by the Commission; blocked amendments to laws inserted by governments to try to protect particular vested interests; and changed legislation to protect the interests of European-wide consumers or employees. Approximately 25 per cent of the amendments to legislation proposed by the European Parliament end up as law, which is considerably more than any national parliament in Europe. It is especially impressive compared with the UK, where majorities at Westminster are often whipped into line to vote for unamended government bills.

One recent example of the positive effect of the European Parliament was the renegotiation of the SWIFT agreement between the USA and the EU in 2010. European governments had signed off on a deal with the United States to share information on all European citizens' financial transactions with the US Department of Homeland Security. Not one of the 27 EU governments saw any problem with the agreement! Thankfully, the European Parliament threw out the agreement on the grounds that the deal committed the European Union to share data with the US authorities about EU citizens' transactions that the US government is not allowed to obtain about its own citizens under US law. My bet is that national parliamentarians – who are beholden to their national governments – would have rolled over and supported their governments.

In the end, following the European Parliament's rejection, the US Vice-President Joseph Biden flew to Brussels to talk to legislators there and recognised most of the concerns of the MEPs. A deal was eventually struck between the US government and the European Parliament, which was duly accepted by the governments. On this issue, the rights of British citizens were far better protected by the European Parliament than by the British government.

Third, in terms of the weak links between British voters and the European Parliament, it is certainly true that few British citizens know who their MEPs are. It is also true that European Parliament elections in the UK are always dominated by domestic issues, and by the performance of domestic politicians, rather than focusing on European and EU issues or on the performance of the British MEPs.

One root of problems here is media coverage. It is not the fault of the MEPs that citizens or national politicians aren't aware of what the European Parliament does. It is more a fault of national politicians and national media outlets – like the BBC – who refuse to spend any time covering what goes on in day-to-day politics in Brussels.

Another important origin of weak voter linkages to the UK's MEPs probably had more to do with the way MEPs are elected in the UK than the way the European Parliament works. Since 1999 British MEPs have been elected by a form of regional party-list proportional representation (PR), where voters can only choose between parties and cannot choose between individual politicians – known as 'closed list' PR since the parties alone determine in which order their candidates are elected.

This closed list PR system provides no opportunities or incentives for individual candidates MEPs to campaign directly to voters. Most other EU member states – such as Ireland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Malta – use a form of proportional representation which allows voters to also choose between candidates from the same political party, known as "open list PR". When politicians from the same party have

to compete with each other for votes in this way they invariably spend more time campaigning directly to citizens.

As a result, research has shown that citizens from EU countries who have open-list PR systems for EP elections are far more likely to be contacted by their MEPs and to receive information about the European Parliament during EP election campaigns than are citizens in countries who have closed-list PR systems for EP elections. Voter turnout in European Parliament elections also tends to be higher in countries with open-list PR than in countries with closed-list PR.

So, in short: politicians at national level in the UK should stop blaming the European Parliament and the British MEPs for the failure of British politicians and the British media to educate British citizens about the European issues or what the European Parliament does. It is more the failure of successive British governments to introduce an open-list PR system for European Parliament elections in the UK that accounts for weaker voter linkages to MEPs in the UK.

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Simon Hix is Director of the Political Science and Political Economy Group at the LSE and is the co-editor of the journal *European Union Politics*. Simon has extensive consultancy experience, including for the UK Cabinet Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Policy Centre, and has given evidence to the European affairs committees in the House of Lords and House of Commons. He has written several books on EU and comparative politics, including most recently “What’s Wrong With the EU and How to Fix It” (Polity, 2008).



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