

Five minutes with Guy Verhofstadt: “We simply cannot stand by and watch as a whole generation grows up without a good prospect of finding a job”

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One of the major distinctions between the 2014 European Parliament elections and previous elections is that each political family will put forward formal candidates for President of the European Commission prior to the vote. In an interview with EUOPP's Managing Editor Stuart Brown, [Guy Verhofstadt](#), former Belgian Prime Minister and Commission candidate for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, discusses EU freedom of movement, the importance of this year's elections, and what his priorities would be if his candidature for Commission President were successful.



European Parliament elections have traditionally been regarded as ‘second order’ elections with low voter turnout. Do the 2014 elections have the real potential to be different?

The 2014 European Parliament elections will be of unparalleled importance. With the greater powers given to the European Parliament under the Lisbon Treaty and the direct link between the outcome of the elections and the nomination of Commission President, this is a momentous opportunity for citizens to shape the future direction the EU will take. I also believe we are beginning to see the emergence of real Europe-wide political debates over international issues such as the debt crisis, migration and mass surveillance. Hopefully this should translate into greater public interest and a higher voter turnout.

Several commentators have predicted that Eurosceptic or populist parties might greatly increase their share of seats in the European Parliament. Is this a sign that European citizens are increasingly rejecting the integration process?

I don't think that European citizens are rejecting the principle of European integration. Many are simply frustrated with the Europe of today and disillusioned with the political class in general. Eurosceptic and populist parties offer cheap, easy solutions that they claim will solve everyone's problems and portray themselves as anti-politicians. But the reality is they don't offer a viable alternative; European countries will inevitably have to work together to succeed and defend their interests in the 21st century. So as Liberals we have to put forward a compelling vision for the Europe of tomorrow, a radical reform of the EU that will make it more democratic and more relevant to its citizens.

You support the creation of a federal Europe. Does Europe have any alternative to pursuing closer integration?

I prefer the term a functional Europe, because what we have in place today clearly isn't working. As we have seen with the handling of the Eurozone crisis, the intergovernmental method leads to policies that are always too little too late. To survive in the long-term, the Eurozone will need a proper banking union and a fiscal union. But I also believe in reforming the EU and scaling back its powers in some areas, for example where regulation is burdening businesses. I don't believe in the EU that regulated olive oil on restaurant tables or the amount of water a toilet flushes. The key is that the EU must be empowered to act in areas where it adds value, but refrain from acting where it doesn't.

What do you say to politicians such as Nigel Farage who have called for the freedom of movement of European citizens to be restricted?

Nigel Farage may talk the talk but he does not walk the walk. When the European Parliament recently voted on EU freedom of movement rules he [wasn't even there!](#) However, the important point is that freedom of movement is a two-way street. The UK government has confirmed that there are now 2.2 million UK citizens living in other EU countries and 2.3 million EU citizens in the UK. Moreover, you can't have the free circulation of goods, capital and services without the free movement of labour. British Conservatives who want to undermine freedom of movement would also be undermining the single market.

If you were to be successful in your candidature for the next President of the European Commission, how would your priorities differ from those of José Manuel Barroso?

My number one priority would be to put in place a proper banking and fiscal union in order to lower the crippling interest rates faced by many national governments and to get banks lending to businesses again. We simply cannot stand by and watch as a whole generation grows up without a good prospect of finding a job. I would also prioritise the completion of trade deals with countries such as the US, India and Japan to help get the European economy moving again. At the same time, I believe the EU must be much bolder in defending its liberal values both at home and abroad on issues such as LBGT rights, mass surveillance and freedom of expression.

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Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the interviewee

Guy Verhofstadt – *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe*

Guy Verhofstadt has held a number of high profile political roles in Belgium. In 1999 he became Belgian Prime Minister and headed three separate governments over the course of nearly ten years. In 2009 he became an MEP in the European Parliament and was elected leader of the ALDE group. In addition to his duties as a politician, Guy has written a number of books including, *The New Age of Empires* (2008) and *Emerging from the Crisis: How Europe can Save the World* (2009).



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