

After Rue Belliard: Retrospectives from Former MEPs

Introduction

The locals call it the *Caprice des Dieux*, a hulking glass dreadnaught that stands just off the rue Belliard in Brussels. It's more familiarly known as the European Parliament.

This paper brings together contributions from several former occupants of that edifice.

Eurosceptic MEPs have long been in a minority in its halls. Yet from being there, they gained a valuable vantage point to monitor what the EU was doing, to occasionally limit some of the worst damage, and more successfully to inform the public by highlighting some of its absurdities and ambitions.

With the UK still in a period of Brexit transition, now is an appropriate time to reflect again on how the EU works. Any short review can merely scratch the surface, as revealed by previous research by the Red Cell looking at the EU's occult law making system.¹ Even so, this paper may help inform those currently negotiating, as they ponder how closely the UK should remain tied up to it institutionally.

All the contributions are from Eurosceptic MEPs who saw the system up close and from the inside.

Rupert Matthews is an author and historian, and it shows in his highly engaging introduction to the pitfalls and democratic disappointments of becoming an MEP.

Lucy Harris is a classical singer who was pushed by fate into the Brexit limelight. Here, she reflects on her own experiences stepping up to the mark as a campaigner, on the hard life of standing up for what you believe in – and in particular the relief it is all over.

David Campbell-Bannerman was co-chairman of Conservatives for Britain. He considers his time as a rue Belliard veteran to review the strategic implications arising from membership of the EU.

Roger Helmer's fascinating contribution is set out in two parts. After exploring some of the fundamentals and flaws of the system, he sets out the quite extraordinary background to a very personal case that hit the headlines – or rather it seems got planted in them. There is a price to pay for becoming too vocal a critic.

Tim Aker came originally from a background of Essex local politics and was also a familiar face in the team at the TaxPayers' Alliance fighting bad policy and government waste. His piece tracks the road to Brexit and provides a succinct overview of how the end state came to pass.

The essays make for remarkable reading. The stark lessons they provide may well dissuade anyone from chasing an extension to the Brexit transition, however short.

¹ Largely involving secret drafting and successive negotiations by very many committees (comitology). See http://www.theredcell.co.uk/uploads/9/6/4/0/96409902/life_of_laws.pdf and also http://www.theredcell.co.uk/uploads/9/6/4/0/96409902/brexit_red_tape_challenge.pdf



Rupert Matthews became MEP for the East Midlands in July 2017 following many years of campaigning on behalf of local people across the region. Prior to his election, Rupert worked in publishing writing a wide variety of children's and history books. He is now the Conservative candidate for Police and Crime Commissioner in Leicestershire and Rutland.

Life as an MEP

My first day as an MEP promised to start off so well. Ashley Fox, the leader of the Conservative delegation of MEPs, had made it sound very easy.

"Once you arrive at the Eurostar Station," he said. "Get a cab to the European Parliament. Use your pass to get in the front door. Then ask for The Passerelle, everyone knows where that is. I'll meet you there." Easy!

My schoolboy French was good enough to tell the cab driver to take me to the European Parliament. So far, so good. I grabbed my suitcase and marched up to a grand bank of glass doors with the words "Parliament Europeen" written in large letters overhead. A guard stopped me. I showed him my glittering new pass. He shook his head and gabbled something at me in French. As I was to learn, the Belgian accent is different to the French I learned back in the day. I asked him to repeat what he had said.

I was at the staff door, not the MEP door. I followed his instructions to an even grander door with an even larger sign. This time I was waved through with a smile.

Once inside, the sheer size of the building was daunting. Corridors led off in all directions, a bank of eight lifts faced me and twin escalators rose up to the next floor. A mass of signs pointed to rooms, buildings and other places in a wide variety of names. Nowhere could I see a sign to The Passerelle. Everyone knows where it is, so there is no need for a sign.

The two ladies behind me in the queue had been speaking English to each other. I turned to them.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'm new here. I've been told to get to The Passerelle. Could you tell me where it is?"

The older of the two ladies peered at the pass around my neck. She frowned.

"You're one of those new Tory MEPs, aren't you!"

I confirmed that I was.

"Then you'll get no help from me," snapped the lady. She grabbed her companion by the arm and marched off. The younger lady gave me an apologetic half-smile and hurried off.

Welcome to Brussels!

I learned later that I had chanced upon a Labour MEP notorious for her rudeness to anyone she considered to be anti-European. Which I was. In spades.

Having finally met Ashley, he gave me a tour of the main building with its 14 floors and five wings filled with meeting rooms. Then we went off to another building of offices where he showed me what would be my office home for the coming years. No kettle, I noticed. No teapot. I'd have to put that right.

"Any questions?" Ashley asked. I thought for a minute.

"You've been here a few years," I replied. "What is the single best bit of advice you can give me?"

Ashley grinned. "Don't mention the war." He looked at his watch. "There's a drinks reception on," he said. "Come on. I'll introduce you to some of our colleagues in the ECR group. Then you can slip off to your hotel."

I followed Ashley through a maze of corridors – one of them with glass walls and roof that was suspended three floors up in the air as it curved over a great open plaza. Eventually we reached an apparently anonymous wooden door in an equally anonymous corridor. Ashley pushed it open. Behind was a great room some 50 feet long that looked like some sort of conference room. There must have been a hundred people there. Ashley dived off to accost a flunkey with a tray of drinks.

"Don't mention the war," I thought to myself.

An imposingly tall blond man with bright blue eyes peeled himself off from a nearby group. He made straight for me with a determined stride.

"Don't mention the war," I thought to myself.

"Gud day," announced the blond giant in a pronounced teutonic accent. "You are vun of zese new English MEPs. Ja?"

I nodded. "Don't mention the war," I thought to myself.

The man nodded and clicked his heels. "Gud. I am Herr Messerschmidt!"

Visions of my father's almost fatal encounter with a very different kind of Messerschmidt back in 1940 swam in front of my eyes.

"Ah," said Ashley appearing at my elbow with a glass of wine. "I see you have met Morten. He's one of our most effective Danish colleagues."

And so began my brief career as an MEP.

As with any new job, the early days were taken up with learning the geography of the place. I soon learned that there were some 14 interconnected buildings, each with its own grand name. Of course, not everyone used those formal names in everyday conversation. And the signage sometimes used the real names, but might equally refer to Building A or Building B. Useless. And all the corridors were painted the same colour and had the same carpets. Even after I had been there for more than a year, I was still getting lost.

I remember one evening when I was trying to find a reception welcoming the new Romanian ambassador to Brussels. I had been sent along to bat for the British Conservatives, smile politely at everyone and engage in small talk with anyone willing to talk to a nonentity like a backbench MEP. I followed the instructions I had been given meticulously, pushed open a door and found myself in a

room where some 50 or so people were standing around chatting, tucking into canapes and knocking back the vino.

I slipped in, grabbed a glass of red and found myself facing a smiling gent in a nicely-cut three piece navy blue suit. He held out his hand. "I am Boris," he announced. "From the ambassador's private office." He waved his hand at a young lady gliding past with a tray of food and waited while I grabbed a tasty looking morsel.

I introduced myself and complimented him on the red wine. "Ah yes," he said. "We are very proud of our wines. And our food. Everything here is from our country. Come. I will introduce you." He steered me towards a couple of young ladies. "Mr Matthews is an English MEP," the man told them. "Sasha works in our trade office," he indicated the lady in a sharp grey business suit. "Excuse me, I must go." He went off to meet another new arrival at the door.

Nicely done, I thought to myself. Clearly I don't rate an introduction to the ambassador himself, but hey ho. I made some small talk with the trade lady, then began to work my way around the room extolling the virtues of the United Kingdom and free trade to anyone who would listen.

The distinctive sound of a fork tinkling on an empty wine glass stilled the room. My old friend in the blue suit cleared his throat.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he announced. "Thank you for coming. And now, the Ambassador will say a few words." He turned to a tall, swarthy man dressed in a surprisingly crumpled grey suit who stepped forward.

"Good evening," beamed the Ambassador. "But first a toast." He raised his glass of wine. "I drink to the eternal friendship between the European Union and Macedonia."

Wait! What! Macedonia!? I was meant to be at the Romanian reception. I listened to the speech from this ambassador, then slipped out of the room. Laughter boomed from the room next door. I peeked in. Another man in another grey suit was making a speech. I crept in. This time I was in the right room.

One of the things that I soon learned, but which nobody ever really explained, was that the European Parliament was a very hierarchical organisation. It was fairly easy to get the formal hierarchy of committee vice chairmen, chairmen, rapporteurs and the like. It was easy enough to get to be a rapporteur if you wanted to be one. All you had to do was volunteer to look after a piece of legislation for your delegation. At least in theory.

In reality, of course, it was not that easy. As a new boy, it was made very clear to me that I would get to "look after a file" only if nobody else wanted that particular file. Which is how I ended up looking after a file looking at how the European Commission had spent money on projects to boost tourism in less prosperous areas of the Balkans.

Not that I got to do much looking after. Every meeting that I went to, I was met at the door by an official from the ECR Group holding a sheaf of papers. At first I fell for the official line that he (or she) was there to help me by providing background data and information. Pretty soon it became clear that in fact he (or she) was there to make sure that I did not do anything as seriously non-communitaire as think for myself. All that data and information was there simply to justify whatever it was the official wanted me to do.

Of course, these official positions were very often the result of endless horse-trading behind the scenes by my elders and betters. The ECR would support this measure if the EPP supported something else. The Chairmen and Vice Chairmen of committees – and others – did those deals, and we poor bloody infantry went into the meetings to do what we were told. The results of every vote were stitched up well before hand.

Every now and then things did not go as planned. If some MEP was late to a meeting a vote could go the “wrong way”. My official would dart off to go into a secret conflagration at the back of the room with other officials. I never got invited to join them – neither did the other MEPs. We democratically elected representatives of the people were superfluous.

Then the official would come back to hiss “We are voting against the next motion.”

“But the voting list you gave me says we are voting for it” I would protest.

“No,” would come the peremptory reply. “The Socialist did not turn up. We lost our motion, so we don’t support their motion.”

I remember just one time when I was called upon to actually do some thinking for myself. At issue was the funding of a car park at a medieval castle somewhere down in the Balkan mountains. It was in the constituency of one of my ECR colleagues and we happened to have been talking about it a few days earlier. The car park was being funded to enhance the castle’s potential as a tourist attraction, helping to boost the economy of a run down area. But the real prize was the access road that was being match-funded by a different budget head. That would provide for the first time ever a surfaced road to the village by the castle.

Come the meeting some MEP queried the funding of the car park and moved an amendment against it. Moving an amendment without notice was frowned upon as it meant that back room deals could not be done. The officials went off into a huddle and mine came back to tell me to vote for the amendment.

No chance. I rather liked my Balkan colleague and wanted to back him up. I texted him to ask how important the car park was. To stop the matter going to a vote, I signalled I wanted to speak. I waxed lyrical on the Balkan wars between the Hapsburg Empire and the Ottomans, and threw in a section on gothic architecture to boot. The other MEPs were getting restive. What was the mad Englishman talking about?

Then the phone of a nearby MEP buzzed. He looked at the message, looked at me and signalled he wanted to speak as well. I gratefully sat down as I was running out of things to say about castles in the Balkans. This new chap took up the baton and held forth about tourism in the area. Then my phone buzzed with a reply from my ECR colleague. The car park was, he said, very important. Next my official’s phone buzzed. He too read the message then signalled to some of the other officials and another huddle took place. He came back. “We vote against the amendment,” he said.

Had I saved the day? I have no idea really. But it was nice to kick over the traces.

Now, dear reader, you will no doubt criticise me for going along with the instructions of a mere official, but that was the system out there. If you don’t abide by the back room deals done by more important folks, you end up in trouble.

Which brings me to the less formal but no less rigid hierarchy of party and group positions. Each political party made up a “delegation” – the UK Conservative Party was one, the UK Labour Party another. Each delegation had its backbenchers (like me), its whip, its leader and other officials. And each delegation had a budget for support staff that was based on how many members it had.

The delegations then belonged to “Groups”. Each Group in turn had its own backbenchers, whips, leader and so forth. And the Group had its budgets for support staff, events, stationary, room hire and so forth. And all that depended on the number of MEPs in the group. The group could divvy up some of that budget to the constituent delegations or keep it all for itself.

Where a delegation or group official sat in the ranking depended on the number of MEPs they represented. So the leader of a small group would count for less than the leader of a big delegation even though he – in theory – ranked higher. This all mattered massively to those on the career ladder because it decided who got to speak when in debates. If you were important you might get 10 minutes at the start of a debate, the less important got less time later on. My record was 60 seconds late one evening when everyone but myself and the chap speaking after me had gone home. I stayed to listen to the final speaker. It would have been rude to leave him on his own.

On a more mercenary note, there was another massive advantage to working your way up the rungs of the twin ladders of hierarchy. All those nice juicy fact-finding missions!

Being cynical, I reckon it was all part of the federalist plot. Every MEP wanted to get a good speaking slot. Every MEP wanted to go on an enjoyable mission. But you only got them if you worked your way up the hierarchy – and that took a lot of time. Years, in fact. By the time any MEP got to have his hands on the levers of power, he would have been in Brussels for a minimum of ten years or more. Plenty of time to get house-trained by the power that be. And, indeed, all the senior MEPs were fully paid up members of the integrationist club.

There was a way to short-circuit the system. There always is. This was to be even more of an ultra EU fanatic that even the longest serving MEPs. That way you got up the career ladder real fast – and blind eyes were turned to any odd behaviour.

It may not be best to mention names at this point – I am working off memory and may misremember details. But I remember talking to one Spanish MEP at a drinks reception who was an amiable enough chap, though I knew him to be a massive fan of EU integration. In passing he told me that had lost his seat at the 2009 European Elections, but had come back in 2014. What had he done in the meantime, I asked? Naively I thought maybe he had gone back to his old career as an accountant, lawyer or whatever. He smiled and told me that he had been given a job in the EU trade office in Argentina. No real work to do, apparently, just something to keep him going until he could come back to Brussels. The benefits of being an ultra federalist.

And then there was the German MEP who got caught fiddling cash into his back pocket. It was a nine-days wonder then it was all forgotten. Another ultra federalist. All can be forgotten so long as you are on the side of the European project.

I’m glad to be out of it and back to earning a living as a historian. No plum job in Buenos Aires for me.



Lucy Harris founded Leavers of London, an organisation which brings together and gives a voice to Brexit voters in the capital, and subsequently established Leavers of Britain. She was elected an MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber at the 2019 European election as part of the UK's final delegation.

I'm from a small town in Suffolk, from a normal state-schooled background. I never thought for one second that I would be in frontline politics. But after the Referendum, I was so shocked and appalled by the reaction to the winning result by some that my awareness of my own politics and agency came quickly into focus and forced me to act, in any way I could, to help in any small way I could, to uphold the result of the referendum. I weighed up the pros and cons of getting involved in politics for over two weeks, and finally I thought if I didn't speak up to protect the fundamentals of democracy - I would never forgive myself, I knew that by being a pacifist on the Brexit question, I would have adopted chronic self-disappointment for the rest of my life.

I spent much of my time trying to weigh up my options. On one hand, if I become political and my actions go far, when this is all over I'd find it difficult to find a job. Especially as I worked in the publishing industry, which is extremely pro-Remain. I also would also be compromising the privacy of my personal life by doing so. But on the other hand, my mother always told me to speak up for what I believed in and if there was any time to speak up, it would be in defence for democracy.

I'm not a coward so I set about making any difference I could.

As someone who was working in communications at the time, I had a basic skill set to set up a campaign, as well as being a young woman with a fairly normal background but a creative background. So I felt I was an ideal candidate to talk for Brexit, as the media were trying to stereotype all Brexiteers as bald reddening angry middle aged men from the North, so my contrasting identity lent itself very well to bursting that bubble.

I set about creating a campaign that brought people together in the capital who voted for Brexit. Back in September 2016, the social fallout from the result of the referendum was so palpable old friends were falling out, families not talking and relationships falling apart. I unfortunately very much had my own experience of this, which made me think that it was almost my job to reach out to people across London.

For a long time EU-sceptics had been treated with contempt, seen as odd balls at the butt of political jokes, and looking at some of the characters in UKIP you could definitely see how that came about. But now that a whole country had voted for Brexit, people in influential positions across the media, institutions and other influential areas failed at reconciling with the result of the referendum. Their confusion and inability of analysis lead them to berating their opposition, to the point of dehumanising them. It was far much easier to write people off as "Low information", "Stupid", "racist", "xenophobic" - too old to matter rather than understand, help and have a modicum of intellectual honesty of the result.

This created an incredibly hostile atmosphere in the Capital, and I had only just reached the tip of the iceberg of the social impact from the public flogging of vast swathes of the general public. The first meeting was near my old university, University College London. I found myself amongst many students and I thought to myself: I wonder what their reaction would be if they knew they were in

the same pub as people who celebrated the fact they voted for Brexit? I made a decision there to add an element of privacy going forward. I would have to make information about the campaign public enough to get people interested in coming, but not public enough so that it endangered the very people it needed involved.

The first meeting, ten people showed up. I was rather chuffed. I thought to myself I'd managed to get ten normal people out from behind the computer and to talk about politics. I felt that was an achievement to build on. Quite quickly the group grew from ten to a thousand people, all wanting to meet up and discuss the latest happenings of Brexit. It was exciting. So many people had been hungry to talk about politics; so many people wanted to meet the type of person who also believed in their politics. Often to their surprise it was exactly people like them. It gave them confidence to be more blashy with their opinions while in other social situations. I thought to myself the only way we were going to win the second referendum argument and the pro-Brexit argument was to remain calm and provide the public with alternative narratives on Brexit, other than we were all racist angry middle aged blokes who hate immigrants - the group I had got together were all so different from that perception that it cut that argument in half. The more people confronted that idea the more, good decent people would question the false stereotype the Remain side was providing.

I was adamant that if I was going to go against the grain, my campaign or movement would be immaculate. To prove that people who are EU sceptics are professionals, normal people, with real political credibility - not an army of people with chips on their shoulders with something to prove, but people with vision and the ability to back up their ideas with details. Time would be spent filtering out troublemakers and advertising itself as mainstream and a positive campaign. I spent hours and hours going through email lists, Twitter feeds, deep Google searches, researching all of my members to make sure nothing would throw a curveball if they ever bumped into a TV crew.

The most important element of the group was the social aspect. It was there to unite people in political belief but the motive for them to do so was also social. The day-to-day social division from Brexit, helped along by ignorant or politically-driven media professionals, was viral. People were losing jobs from Remain bosses, being treated with disrespect at work, teachers even had papers thrown at them in the staff room. Others had been barred from dinner parties and family events. People wanted to talk about their personal experiences of having voted Leave. I have to admit I was surprised to hear so many stories of such Brexit bias within society, that no wonder people wanted to let off steam, and feel for once that they were actually normal people, with no darkness in their hearts. It was so surprising to me that loved ones were not willing to discount their loved ones' opinions, and use their knowledge of that individual to reconsider their opinion if not just on Brexit, at least the character of their own loved one. There was a distinct lack of goodwill, curiosity and benefit of the doubt from people who were vehemently Remain.

After years of developing my London group, I singlehandedly launched nationally, and Leavers of Britain was born. I made frequent TV and radio interviews - which at first I found exciting, but after years of being pulled around it began to wear me out, of which I'll go into later. It then ballooned to over seven thousand members and myself and the campaign were reaching over 2 million people a month. My social media presence had increased exponentially and I found myself as the media go-to young woman on the social issues of Brexit, appearing on political shows every two days. My days were spent organising events across the country and travelling to them. It involved days away from family and friends as well as lonely nights and solitary train journeys, and meeting a variety of

different people, with different problems, personalities and priorities. Navigating through this alone took its toll on me mentally.

Having built up a few contacts in politics, going to pro-Brexit events and just chatting with people in the Westminster pubs, it was not unusual to get phone calls from pro-Brexit figures wanting a chat or looking to collaborate. I received a call from Richard Tice, chairman for another, larger campaign who wondered whether I would be interested in standing for the European elections for the Brexit Party.

As a bit of background to the political backdrop during this period, Theresa May was cocking up Brexit royally and had no conviction or vision for Brexit Britain. She had abandoned her political responsibility to take hold of the reins of the civil service and direct the negotiations in favour of the winning referendum result. We were in a logjam. By February/March time, Cooper and Letwin had got through an amendment in Parliament that prevented the Government pursuing No Deal in the case of not coming to an agreement with the European Union by 31st October, and also forced the Government's hand to ask the EU for an extension. This effectively meant that we would be in talks forever until either a pro-EU Parliament were happy or the EU were happy. It also significantly weakened our negotiating hand.

Now, I had never been involved in party politics before and I had no intention in getting involved. Things always seem to get nasty when one is forced to make a public political decision. But even if I had to side in a party political way, I would have been a Conservative, as my fundamental philosophy sat very much with theirs, many politicians I admired were of the Tory party, and I frequently worked with them at events. We had common ground and understanding on many different levels. However, I could not lend myself to Theresa May's Tory party. The lack of drive, vision and honesty in her intentions made me completely turned off to help her electorally, and if that was the way the Conservative party intended to go, there was no way they would survive.

I told Richard I would think about it. I offered to help with strategy, but that was quickly turned down. I continued to weigh up the pros and cons; it could be an opportunity to contribute to shape EU-scepticism to a more mainstream political ideology, I thought to myself. The European elections were not very party political anyway... and if it helps them scare the bejeebers out of the May leadership, I would genuinely be contributing to a positive change to actually get Brexit, just as long as a Brexiteer got the subsequent Leadership!

I called my Dad, a northern bloke from Stockport to explain my dilemma. He responded:

“Well, its not everyday you get the opportunity to do something you believe in, that would also help your country. It's an opportunity people like us don't often get.”

“Sometimes in life you can play it safe, or you can take a risk.”

“I think you should say yes.”

He was right.

After coming out in support of the Brexit Party in its very successful candidate reveal campaign, I set about campaigning for two weeks in Yorkshire. Again, lonely nights. The money I had was running out fast, spending it on hotels, transport and many rounds at the pub. I was the youngest member of the MEP entourage, I rarely had the resources to keep up with the campaigning and still pay a

London rent. At one point I thought I would have to cut campaigning short, despite meticulous application of finances to each day of the campaign. On election day, I went to Leeds Town Hall. It reminded me of going to a pantomime, going through the aged corridors of an old big building, getting your ticket and then waiting in an old dusty hall with a stage.

Like I said, I was very new to party politics, but it was quite surreal to see each political party actually mingling. Everyone eyeballed us as the Brexit Party walked in. We were set to take the majority of the seats, and they knew it. Lib Dems and the Labour party made snarky comments to us, even insults, which didn't hurt because I didn't recognise them being directed at me. They seemed to know a lot about the depths of my own psyche and what's in my heart without having ever met me or talked to me. So their insults fell on deaf ears as I couldn't reconcile any relation of them to me.

After waiting all night, we were told we would be called up on stage and we should line up. When my name was called out I went onto the stage. At this point I didn't know the cameras were already live, and I started yanking up my tights, caught for all to see on national TV.

Skipping onto my first day in Strasbourg plenary, I was late for the infamous back turning, I felt incredibly guilty for being a no show. This was due to a very close death in the family, and I was at the funeral, my connecting flight was then cancelled. A pretty rubbish day.

I arrived at the restaurant where all the Brexit Party folk had conjugated. I was excited to converse with them and chat about their first day. They had well and truly made a splash. Grabbing headlines for days to come, they had set the agenda and tone for the UK in the EU after the Referendum - rowdy, disobedient and relentless.

Everyone of course wanted to sit next to the party leader. I myself at this stage wanted to get used to being in the group and focus on catching up with MEP friends. The restaurant food was pretty standard, and I wondered why we had chosen a venue so far away from central and the Parliament. Perhaps it was not to be bothered by anyone else. Perhaps it was so we could be the maximum level of rowdiness without it getting papped. Perhaps Farage knew the restaurateur? Who knows.

Plenary was every month for about a week in Strasbourg. You were expected to turn up to these as a minimum before the Parliament started taking action against you, like docking your pay or sending you MORE paperwork (what I feared the most!) Getting there was a stressful affair. Long car journeys (paid for by the European Union of course) from the airport or day-long train journeys. More long and lonely journeys. Each plenary costing millions in transport and expenses for staff and MEPs as well as colossal carbon footprint.... I was later on told that the European Parliament had voted to do away with these expensive monthly trips to Strasbourg, but this decision was of course, ignored by those in real authority.

After spending weeks away from home in Brussels and Strasbourg, as well as actually doing something for the Yorkshire community, I found myself constantly travelling, alone. I rarely saw my other half. I found myself constantly chasing my tail on paperwork either for taxes, travel or other. It was almost as if I travelled to generate something to do. At the start of our mandate the Brexit Party MEPs were advised against turning up every day to claim our expenses. That was fine by me, I did not want to spend my time in Brussels. The more time spent there meant the more you were drawn into the system. With generous wages, private cars, first class travel, allowances for all sorts of

things, more staff than you need, skipping the coffee queue privileges....these perks made you feel like a person of importance despite the fact you had no power to initiate legislation whatsoever.

Many people ask me what we actually do in the European Parliament as Brexit Party MEPS. Well, being a protest politician who actively seeks to undermine a system means you don't apply yourself to the system. It means you can step out of it and almost become like a political commentator. It was our job to build a movement, but also highlight the democratic failings of the European Union. We also pressed lots of buttons - literally a lot of buttons (when voting). We were probably some of the most expensive button pushers in history of button pushing.

This brings me to the European Parliament voting system. It wasn't like our Parliament where each law is considered in a thorough debate, where there is almost a negotiation between the two sides of Parliament trying to honestly find the best way forward, which is then carried through by walking through the lobby to vote. With the European Parliament, debate is a facade. MEPs use it as an opportunity to get Youtube clips and make sweeping generalisations of complex topics or spout moral platitudes on vogue topics. Debate is often feared, and questions can be rejected. Rather than listening and responding, MEPs will often just try and shame the other in their opinion rather than addressing the actual issues and concepts the debate is supposed to conjure. To vote, MEPs use a voting sheet with symbols that represent *For*, *Against*, and *Abstain* on a button panel. The voting lists are massive and you go through the votes at breakneck speed. Sometimes merely putting your arm up is enough to vote. But the speed and the insufficient method of putting your hand up also misses the actual outcome of votes, and we have to vote again. Other times, calls from MEPs for a re-vote is ignored. The lack of a democratic rigorous process was persistently obvious.

Ultimately you really have to ask if there is such growing Euroscepticism within the EU Parliament, who constantly criticise your institution, does that mean you don't allow enough criticism within the system? Do you allow for dissent? Do you allow for change? If so, perhaps there would not be such a successful streak of political critics who act to undermine your authority. The very fact the European Union has swathes of MEPs within the European Parliament, who build their careers on the very rejection of the institution, suggests there are not enough democratic mechanisms for change within it.

You will know when the European Union becomes democratic. It'll be the day when there is no need for Eurosceptics. To become genuinely democratic to the people of Europe would be to remove the carpet from our feet. But those in power will never relinquish power to ordinary Europeans. Ever.

Eventually the Brexit Party spooked Theresa May so much and confidence in her plummeted to an all new low, the point was reached that Conservative grassroots were rebelling and refusing to campaign. Boris Johnson finally got his rightful position as Leader of the Conservative party, in an almost prodigal manner. This meant a complete change in role for the Brexit Party. Many Brexit Party voters were indeed disgruntled Tories that wanted to teach their party a lesson. They were borrowed from the Conservative party. Even at Brexit Party rallies whenever the Brexit Party leader mentioned Boris negatively, he was met with silence rather than the usual pantomime jeers. Whether they understood it or not, people loved Boris. He was fun and bouncy and always lightened the mood. As well as being outspoken he was friendly, but simultaneously reminded people of Churchill. He wasn't the angry, chip-on-your-shoulder Kipper, he was a slightly quirky, posh boy that reminded people of their own clumsy self.

This changed everything. Half the Brexit Party MEPs were Tories at heart. More of them loved Boris than they let on. It also didn't help that Boris had managed to get significant changes made to the Withdrawal Agreement. They allowed the UK to get out of the deadlock, but still to have a more open discussion at a later date on the future relationship between the UK and EU. Above all getting this deal through meant that No Deal could be put back on the table at the end of the negotiating period, which added a significant advantage in the coming negotiations. I concluded after reading through it, dividing up the risk on each questionable passage, that the new deal could still enable us to be an independent country. However, it was all dependent on having great negotiators and a consistent approach to negotiations. Did I trust a Boris administration to do that? Did I have faith in him?

A general election was finally called and things got hairy. Things suddenly became very party political and extraordinarily aggressive. If you even hinted that you thought Boris' deal could be a goer, you were instantly hauled up in meetings, humiliated and derided by fellow MEPs. I didn't really get the worst of it - that was saved for the more outspoken of the group. I believed it would be good to have some Brexit party MPs. There were many talented people that had put themselves forward as candidates. They were really wonderful people. I thought they would be real assets for the country if they had made it.

The leader then made his strategy very clear for the general election. It was to berate Boris' deal and in my eyes to put marginal seats at risk for a Labour win, forcing the Tories to potentially negotiate with TBP to stand down in seats it could potentially win. Ultimately, this strategy fell through, and the marginal seats became too important to lose for the Tory party. It seemed to make no sense at all if one wanted Brexit. Whether we liked it or not we were still working to a two party system. One was offering Brexit, one wasn't. If you loved Brexit, why would you even risk letting Corbyn in? Why would you do that? To keep the party relevant? To keep yourself relevant? Was it all because there was a fundamental distrust of Tories? Of Boris?

Whatever it was, I didn't agree with any of the rationale I could think of to continue, and I decided I could no longer continue to support the party. With the news that the results were unpredictable at a constituency level, and the possibility of Corbyn forming a Government in a hung Parliament, I did the only thing I could to swing the result in any small way.

Now I was just some kid from the Suffolk backwaters. I didn't want to go this deep. But if you're going to do something you have to do it properly. If you're a politician and you don't speak out or stand up for your beliefs, what's the point? To be just window dressing for a temporary political campaign? Just tick the woman box? No. You have to be bold when you are in a position to be.

I defected in on December 5th, and boy, did I get a lot of **** for doing so, I still do. I have no regrets, only those of a personal nature.

I'm relieved that Brexit is finally happening. I am relieved to no longer be an MEP. The constant travelling, organising, talking, media, putting people in touch with each other, absorbing vast amounts of technical information, remembering it and delivering it on TV, being overly paranoid about if you're helping or hindering the movement. People always asking you "Lucy, what do you think?" and then expected to have an insightful opinion on literally every twist and turn of the Brexit debate. Having calls from people demanding things from you everyday. People asking you how you are, when you don't even know who you are anymore. People making conspiracy theories up about

you. People trying to highlight you as a bad person, getting hate emails, people assuming the worst in your character for misspoken words or a slightly odd movement of a facial expression on TV... Being on long lonely train journeys, lonely nights, people chasing you for random bits of paperwork you never knew were warranted. People commenting on your attire and constant personal remarks about your appearance and *never* being able to give your friends and family the attention they deserve. But ultimately, wondering whether you could do more and whether you've done enough, whether you've been fair to people. Whether you've actually made a difference.

I am relieved that it's all over, and I can resume my life. I've learnt a lot from the unexpected experience of being a political figure. I've learnt diplomacy, how to engage people, how to inspire and to listen. I've learnt how to build something up and be a leader. Above all I've realised how difficult decisions are made, to believe in the best in people, and how to find a way to make things happen when the odds seem stacked against you. I learnt to say no, stick up for myself. I've learnt never to give up.

People think that politicians have it easy, or are useless. The truth is that they are trying to do the best they can in a difficult situation while remaining true to their values and goals. Sometimes they get it wrong, sometimes they get it right.



David Campbell Bannerman was an MEP for the East of England 2009-19. A keen Brexiteer, David was Deputy Leader and Chairman of UKIP, elected for them in 2009, then returned to the Conservatives in 2011 to argue the case for a Referendum; and was re-elected in 2014. He became Co-Chairman of Conservatives for Britain with Steve Baker MP and Chaired Vote Leave's Contact Group of Eurosceptic groups during the Referendum, contributing an early strategy paper. He served in Government as Special Adviser on the Northern Ireland Peace Process 1996-97 and Bow Group Chairman. He stood down before the 2019 election as he did not believe they should have been held.

When asked 'what was Brussels like?' my immediate response is: it was not just Brussels physically, of course, this is a catch all term. What we call 'Brussels' embraces the 'true' European Parliament – the main plenary chamber in the wonderful city of Strasbourg rather than the more compacted chamber in Brussels and its host of committee rooms, but also the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in Luxembourg, the European Court of Auditors, and the EU's administrations there under the treaties. Indeed, the reason why technically only a half day was worked on Fridays (I worked full days) in Brussels proper was to allow the army of technocrats to travel back to their homes in tax free Luxembourg.

But even in Brussels there were divisions: the Commission and the Council buildings sat quite separately with its own cluster of TV studios, bars and restaurants, whilst there is the European Parliament's cluster of restaurants, bars and offices around Place Luxembourg. Close – a 10 to 15 minutes' walk – yet distant politically and culturally. For the real power in Brussels lay with the Commission and Council. The measures introduced under the dreadful Lisbon Treaty / EU Constitution gave the Parliament more powers of consultation and some voting powers but the reality of the power balance never fundamentally changed.

At heart the problem with the European Union is that its true founder the technocrat Jean Monnet hated democratic politicians and nation states, so that the model he created was a transnational EU Superstate not an intergovernmental international body. This is why there is no clamour across the EU or the UK for a Referendum to leave the World Trade Organisation, or NATO, or the United Nations, because national sovereignty is not overridden unaccountably and undemocratically the way the EU does. It doesn't take 4 years plus and a lot of aggro to leave these bodies – nations are respected and can leave and return at will, like the French leaving NATO, then returning. This is in a nutshell why the EU is a bad organisation and doesn't work for its citizens. It has the wrong architecture and unsuitable institutional power structures.

Prosaically, the best illustration of who is boss in the EU lay in the Parliamentary chamber and its procedures. Incredibly, as an MEP I was unable to introduce any new legislation (I didn't want to) – this is in the sole right of the Commission. I was also lucky to get one minute to make a speech – it was a matter for rejoicing such was the rarity of getting two minutes or more. Compare that to MPs and the regular ability to speak for quite long periods. But for an MEP, that means you were lucky to thank the President and mention the subject at hand, before you ran out of time. Meanwhile, the Commission representative and Council representative often had 10 minutes or more – the Parliamentary President would never cut them off – and TURN OFF THEIR MICROPHONE – if they went over.

Think of this for a moment: can you imagine the House of Commons sitting, and sitting on the front bench with the MPs you find the Head of the Civil Service and Permanent Secretaries, and representatives of a foreign government who just happens to have a six month spell as top dog amongst then 28 members, say it is Romania. So, after the MPs debate a bill or a motion, these unelected officials are allowed by the Speaker to stand up and criticise the MPs who have spoken against, to argue in favour of the legislation or motion, and with no real time constraint, like ministers, and then the relevant Rumanian minister for the subject in hand recites the official government line back at the MPs before they are then allowed to vote. Well, that is how the EU operates.

As a new MEP you have a fear that the system might win you over – you will ‘go native’. But no chance – being there just compounded my concerns and strengthened by fears. I noted with interest how many visitors to the Parliament and EU who were pretty neutral on the benefits of the EU, were tipped against it just by seeing it in action, at work. Ironic, because the EU subsidised them to come!

So you sit there in those ridiculously heavy and clumsy Dalek commander blue seats and wonder how on earth an extremely overpaid, unelected, unaccountable anonymous official or unheard of remote and mysterious minister from a country you have often not even visited or struggle to know the geography of, can berate you and support the new EU legislation in that robotic technocratic way, that you are doing your level best to stop or amend for the benefit of your poor downtrodden constituents, who are paying for all this nonsense.

There were times when the whole thing was amazingly depressing. Too often I sat there listening and thinking: you know, if I reported what I am hearing now, people at home would think I am a crank, an extremist, exaggerating wildly. But it is hear in front of me – it is real. The fact that the EU was poorly reported and seen to be irrelevant to most including many MPs was a big problem. It was not irrelevant but it was bad. That was my Churchill moment – when you think of Churchill being branded a warmonger for reporting factually the dangers of German rearmament and being banned from the BBC until 1939... So how do you tell people what is really happening here?

You only have to look at the voting lists and the colourful chart of votes that appears after every recorded electronic vote (Roll Call Votes) and you see how outnumbered we were on most issues of difference. Even with a large national delegation – we Conservatives had 20 MEPs, the Brexit Party at its height 29 MEPs; this too often gets lost in a chamber of 751 MEPs (in my time).

You glance over at where the real power in the EU lies: the federalist-leaning central EPP (European Peoples Party) and the federalist-loving Socialist (SD) and Liberal (ALDE Group) blocs - these are the EU’s willing sheep, their little helpers for the real powers in the Commission and Council. If these three blocs favour EU legislation, all resistance is futile. The European Parliament favours political bocks in order to incentivise cross country parties in future. This Parliament is meant to be democratic – so often Remoaners would berate you: “But you are elected. Of course the EU is democratic”. Not if you understand the power structures, and the numbers.

And how do you leave the EU in face of such power and resources and numbers ranged against you? Nigel Farage was really a one person opposition in this sea of consensus, and instinctively said what so many of us thought. I grew to fear ‘consensus’ – because it so stifles informed, reasonable opposition. Cooperation yes, consensus no.

This EU consensus is in increasing divergence and isolation from the desires, wishes and needs of the citizens of the EU's nations. A dangerous gap. Brexit was the manifestation of the gap in Britain, driven by a common sense people who have never felt Continental or European as proud islanders who were last conquered in 1066. The politics driven by the realities of constant invasion, such as in Brussels which has adopted a surly resistance like stones beneath the inevitable waves and has five separate parliaments in the city alone reflecting its federal Flemish and Walloon model.

Of course, you can form friendships – even with ardent political opponents, signed up federalists – look how well Farage got on with Commission President Juncker, who had been a democratic Prime Minister at least, but united it was claimed by a love of smoking and booze! Our friends are the nations of Europe, many of which share our concerns over democracy, overcentralisation of power and its corporatist Socialist core, whilst our opponents are the institutions of the EU and the federalists who will not let any nation, person or cost stand between them and their Valhalla of a European Superstate. They are the scary ones.

So, 'Were we right to disengage from Brussels?' The question here is really: 'Is the EU reformable? Can it be made more democratic, accountable, acceptable to us?' I would say it should be reformable, and it would be if it was really democratic, but simply is not so.

It isn't reformable because of its destination. Whilst in Britain, we have been lied to and misled by British politicians about the true aims of the EU/EEC right from the start – when Heath brazenly referred to no loss of sovereignty – to the whole issue of Project Fear in the Referendum seeking to deny the massive transfer of sovereign powers. I said in the Referendum that if you realise you are on the wrong bus heading to the wrong destination, it might be sociable and cosy on board, but you must get out at the next available stop even if that may seem isolated and lonely.

Even now, Remainers still argue there is no EU Army, that this is a figment of our fevered imagination, when senior EU figures like Chancellor Merkel and the new EU Commission head, Ursula von der Leyen, have openly referred now to the need for an EU Army, and with the EU's own permanent military headquarters now up and running and established. Pity poor underfunded NATO that they are sidelining, whilst Germany is still refusing to pay the minimum membership contribution of 2% of GDP.

To me, this is all logical; it just isn't desirable. If you are creating a new country called Europe – that EU Superstate – then it is logical that the new state has an army. It was logical that a new state should have one currency – the Euro. That is a political currency, a tool of political integration, at the price of bad economics. They allowed Greece to join the Euro as an old great European state, despite its deficit running at up to four times the limit specified under the Maastricht Treaty.

The *modus operandi* of this nation-building is to do it dishonestly, covertly subverting, and with constant denial so as to disguise the true nature of the moves. The EEC was burnt badly when it tried to create a European army too early after its start, and the French Assembly strongly rejected the moves. So that policy has come last.

It was the architect Monnet who is quoted as saying: "Europe's nations should be guided towards the superstate without their people understanding what is happening. This can be accomplished by successive steps, each disguised as having an economic purpose, but which will eventually and irreversibly lead to federation."

This again is logical – if one anticipates opposition to your political project, you may reduce such opposition or render it less effective or too late if you disguise the aims and deny the reality of what has happened. The plan all along is to get us into a position that we cannot get out of – one day we will wake up in an EU Superstate without realising, and it will be too late. I used the image of a slowly boiling and quizzical British lobster in a Brussels pot for my book ‘Time to Jump’ – thank God we jumped in time and have scarpered for the exit!

The EU with an army has all the criteria needed in place to apply to the United Nations to be considered a nation state. It could do this tomorrow – it has the Government, the Parliament, civil service, currency, integrated trade, social security, the judiciary, policing and the European Public Prosecutor, immigration and border systems.

We in Britain were right to leave the EU because we did not share its final destination – that of this full EU Superstate. That has always been the destination; ‘Ever Closer Union’ is in the Treaty of Rome, and Kenneth Clarke made this point in a debate with me – the man on record saying he wanted Westminster to become a council chamber. We were just told that it wasn’t, we were misinformed by tabloid press and nutty Eurosceptics, and the EU is just a trading bloc. They lied.

If we could change that destination, even after the concrete on its aims and institutions has set – even if we could take a drill to that concrete, break it up and re-lay the concrete – we would still be right to leave. But as David Cameron’s insipid ‘renegotiation’ proved, even when a leading member state so publicly calls for and expends so much political capital on reform, only insignificant token results follow. The ‘project’ will not be put off course. Without this travesty being so exposed, and so brutally and nonchantly by the EU, it is doubtful we would have won the referendum.

It became obvious to me as an MEP that our kindred spirits in our Euroscepticism tended to be from older, long-established nation states. England is dated as a united nation to Athelstan in 927, and Denmark is likewise an ancient nation – having once run a lot of England! – and it also rejected the Euro. The Dutch are close to us too. Meanwhile, the German constitution dates from 1945 and the French constitution to 1958, two years after the Treaty of Rome. Political roots that are far shallower are more amenable to radical change. Whilst Britain took full advantage of a host of opt outs such as over the Euro and Schengen, France had no opt outs.

The choice in the referendum – given this direction of travel – was really either: embrace the EU Superstate and become a region of a country called Europe, or restore British Sovereignty – and being a proud, independent, sovereign nation once more. We chose right.

We chose to leave the European Union before it totally enveloped us and destroyed our nation state. There was no realistic alternative option given the nature of this beast, and the British people deserve enormous praise for their courage, fortitude and foresight for doing so. We are a tough, decent and resilient nation – as this terribly testing time during the Coronavirus outbreak is again demonstrating – and will prosper and enjoy our freedoms and restored rights again for many years to come.

But it is also right to remain friends of the EU nation states, their peoples, and the EU itself. It is not our job to bring down the EU, but if other nations decide to leave that is their free choice. I think we will still be heavily engaged in trading, market standards, cooperation over fighting crime and

terrorism, over working together on international initiatives where we find common cause. We won't be pulling up the drawbridge; nor should we do that.

As a former MEP, I am privileged to have been able to play a part in this great national renaissance, to have been involved in truly historic events, and I remain, despite the present day massive challenges, ever optimistic for the future.



Roger Helmer graduated from Churchill College, Cambridge, with a degree in mathematics. He spent the first thirty-three years of his career working in marketing and general management, mostly with large multinational companies, including a total of twelve years as an ex-pat in East and South East Asia. In 1999 he was elected (head of list) as Conservative MEP for the East Midlands. Re-elected in 2004 and 2009, he became disillusioned with the Conservative Party's European policies and in 2012 crossed the floor to join UKIP. In 2014 he stood (again head of list) for UKIP, and was elected for the fourth time. In 2017, aged 73, believing that Brexit was a done deal, and facing major surgery, he retired from the European parliament. He now lives on Leicestershire with his fiancée, travels extensively, and continues to take a keen interest in politics, supporting The Brexit Party, and maintaining a presence on Twitter @RogerHelmerMEP.

Aspects of the MEP experience – 1999/2017

As an MEP for 18 years (1999-2017), one of the questions I was most often asked, by opponents, constituents, journalists and others, was “If you’re opposed to the EU project, how come you’re working for the European parliament?”. The answer, of course, is straightforward. I was not elected to work “for” the European parliament, nor for the European project. I was not elected to represent the EU in the East Midlands – I was elected to represent the East Midlands, and its electors, in Brussels. I believed that I served the best interests of those electors by striving to get Britain out of the EU, and enough of them agreed with me to re-elect me in 2004, 2009 and 2014. And indeed when the British people voted to Leave in 2016, I believed that my objective had been achieved, my work was done, and in 2017, at the ripe old age of 73, I decided to retire. Little did I realise that it would take another full 3½ years of struggle, debate and anguish to deliver the result.

A more considered question I frequently faced was “OK, but if you’re opposed to the EU, how can you accept a salary (and occasionally – plus pension rights, expenses etc) from it?” The flippant answer, given that the UK has been a major net contributor to the EU for nearly half a century, is that it’s our money anyway, and I’m happy to facilitate the repatriation of a little of it. But more seriously, an elected politician is a “public office holder”, providing (in my case) a service to electors in the region, and as such is entitled to the statutory benefits. Moreover lacking hereditary wealth and landed estates, I simply could not have survived financially without the income.

There is a tendency to believe that “MEPs don’t do any work”. Usually this comes from people who disagree with the MEP on policy. All I can say is that whether or not you agree with the work I did and the positions I took, it is in fact more than a full-time job. Four days a week in Brussels or Strasbourg, three in the region, long hours, constant travelling. And it’s maybe worth adding that in 1999 I took a salary cut compared to my previous employment (as MD of a company in Leicester) – as, I believe did Nigel Farage, elected at the same time. But as Nigel often says, “We’re in this for a result – not for a career”. And we got the result.

Over the years I frequently drew attention to the undemocratic – indeed anti-democratic – nature of the European project. This drew a predictable response from EU apologists. “But you’re a member of the European parliament, elected by a popular vote. How on earth can you say it’s not democratic?”

Where to start? There are so many reasons. First, the unelected Commission has the sole right to initiate EU legislation. To grasp how preposterous this is, imagine for a moment that the House of Commons was told it could no longer initiate legislation, and that an external and unelected body would draft all new legislative proposals.

OK, say the apologists. But the EP can amend legislation, or block it entirely. True, at least in theory. But the EP almost never blocks legislation (for reasons we'll come to). And yes, it can pass amendments. But these are subject to haggling between the parliament, the Commission and the Council (also unelected), and may or may not survive.

Secondly, the lack of real debate. With far too many members (pre-Brexit 751), and too little time, speaking time is handed out in dribs and drabs. Mostly members with key points to make are limited to a mere 60 seconds.

Thirdly, structural majorities. The UK's much-derided "Anglo-Saxon" approach to economics often means that it has few allies. Perhaps the Scandinavian countries, perhaps not. This is why the UK so very rarely gets its way. Over the last two decades of our membership there have been 72 occasions when the UK opposed a particular measure in Council. It lost every time. Yes, say the apologists, but on the vast majority of measures it voted "Yes", so mostly it got what we wanted. They fail to add that there is huge peer pressure to acquiesce, and that any member-state is reluctant to oppose the consensus knowing they'll lose, and lose credibility.

But the fourth reason is perhaps the least obvious, but most interesting. I decided to stand for the EP back in late 1997, prompted by a story on BBC's Today programme. A group of Tory MEPs was making a special trip to London to plead with William Hague to take a more positive line on the Euro currency. Who the hell (I asked myself) are we sending to Brussels to represent us? I was well aware that Conservative Party members were broadly against the Euro – so why were Tory MEPs in favour?

I soon realised that in all the mainstream parties, the selection procedure is hugely biased in a Europhile direction. To understand why, consider the process. Almost invariably, the first step of a putative candidate, sitting in a Party Meeting, is to raise a hand and say "I'd like to be considered". And what sort of people are likely to do that? Clearly those who are most interested in – and most in favour of – the European project. And we see this in all three legacy parties – Tory, Labour, Lib-Dem. And across the EU generally. Perhaps the best illustration is the European Constitution. In January 2005, the European parliament voted 500 to 137 in favour. 74% in favour, 20% against, a few abstentions. That includes French MEPs. Yet in the subsequent French referendum, 55% of French voters voted NO. A clear and dramatic disconnect between the electorate and their democratically elected representatives in Brussels.

This tendency to self-selection extends not just to the parliament itself, but to committees within the parliament. I noted that the Agriculture Committee was full of farmers, the Environment Committee packed with green zealots, the Social Affairs Committee with trade unionists and shop stewards, the Women's Committee with Women. And the Foreign Affairs Committee was full of foreigners.

The European parliament is a Potemkin Village. It is a façade, a veneer, designed to give an illusion of democratic legitimacy to an essentially undemocratic structure. It is now widely recognised that Article 50 of the Maastricht Treaty was deliberately designed so that Remainers could say to

Brexiters “You must support this Treaty – look, you want to leave the EU – this Treaty gives you the mechanism to do so”. It was never designed or expected to be used. The European parliament is essentially the same. It exists so that EU apologists can say “Yes, we are democratic – look at the parliament”, while in effect leaving the technocrats and apparatchiks free rein to run the project.

The EU targets sceptics in the EP

I’d like to recount some of the measures that the European Parliament (EP) administration targets against MEPs who take a counter-consensual view, who disagree with the Brussels orthodoxy, or who dare to challenge the European project. Of course some high-profile cases are well-known – we all remember when Nigel Farage was fined ten day’s allowances for describing then Council President Herman van Rompuy as “having all the charisma of a wet tea-towel” and “resembling a low-grade bank clerk”. I loved Nigel’s response when pressed to apologise: “Yes”, he said, “I’ll apologise. I’ll apologise to all the bank clerks across Europe for comparing them to Van Rompuy”.²

Cases like this make headlines. But there is less coverage for the constant war of attrition waged by the institutions against sceptics.

And I’ll start with a disclaimer. No MEP ever got public sympathy over his expenses. So despite the fact that the parliament, on its own account and without any apparent justification, chose to confiscate £100,000 which it owed me, I’m not expecting sympathy. But I *am* seeking to illustrate the way the European institutions are happy to set aside their own “values” of justice, fairness and the rule of law, to punish dissenters and assuage their own vindictive prejudices.

I was an MEP for 18 years, from 1999 to 2017. In 2012, I hired a guy called Paul Oakden as my Constituency Manager in the East Midlands. He ran my UK office, organised my UK diary and appointments, managed my press officer and an administrator, liaised with the many organisations I worked with, put out fires when necessary, and even (over and above his proper duties) helped me sort out computer issues at home, and even drove me to the airport when my car was in for service. He did an excellent job, and was one of the best staffers I had in my eighteen years in the parliament.

However by 2015, the UK office was running like clockwork, and with other pressures on my staff budget, I agreed with Paul that he should switch to 50% part-time working for me. Of course he needed a full time income, but he was able to obtain another half-time administrative job, with UKIP, the party I represented. He served this dual rôle for two years, 2015/16. Towards the end of 2016, the parliament decided to query his dual rôle, suspecting (they said) that he was in fact working full-time for the party, and that I was using my staff budget improperly to subsidise a UKIP staffer. Initially, I was not alarmed. I had ample evidence that he was actually working for me, so (I thought), no problem. We had been in constant, daily contact, on working days and, indeed, at weekends, when he not infrequently attended political events with me (he also came as organiser and bag-carrier on several overseas trips). I was in touch with Paul not merely in his assigned working time, but evenings, weekends, whenever an issue arose. I was able to produce telephone and e-mail evidence of contacts *averaging nine per working day* throughout 2016, and even this

² <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/mar/02/nigel-farage-fined-mep-rompuy>

was a substantial underestimate – the parliament itself being unable to provide telephone records for more than half the year. I submitted a report from Paul on the work he had done, with a parallel report from myself confirming his account. I produced testimony from both his direct reports that he was their line manager. I produced letters from six local suppliers to the Market Harborough office affirming that Paul was their primary contact for dealing with my constituency affairs. I even produced photographs of the signage outside the UK office door, giving Paul's name **and mobile number** so that he was available to constituents at all hours.

I was astonished when this weight of evidence was dismissed, summarily and cursorily, first by the administration, then by the College of Quæstors (the MEPs' shop stewards), and finally by the Bureau of the parliament (the top management board including the President of the parliament). The rejection letters were all very similar, and contained largely the same words, written, I assume, by the same hand. I think the outcome was pre-determined, and the appeals considered summarily if at all.

The parliament, or its general secretary Klaus Welle, decided as a consequence to "recover" from me the sum total of Mr. Oakden's salary and expenses charged against my staff allowance for the two years 2015/16, a sum amounting to £101,364.50. They did this by docking my transition allowance, which is the termination payment made to departing MEPs, and amounts to a month's salary for every year of service. In the case of my 18 years' service, it came to much the same figure, leaving a few quid over to finance enough beer to drown my sorrows. I suspect that Mr. Welle determined the penalty so as, in effect, to confiscate the entire transition allowance.

They separately made a similar claim regarding my press officer, and temporarily cut off his funding, causing him great anxiety and distress. Fortunately he had kept comprehensive press cutting files of his work and the coverage he achieved, so that they were forced to withdraw that decision.

My first thought was to sue. After all, they were confiscating my money. It was not my job to prove that the money had been properly spent – it was their job to prove it mis-spent, which they could not do. However, I took advice from a French lawyer in Paris with experience of bringing cases against the parliament on behalf of aggrieved employees. And here I ran up against the European legal system. First of all, my "burden of proof" assumption ran up against a 2017 ECJ decision which explicitly reverses the burden of proof in these cases, and makes the MEP liable to prove that the work was done. (*Judgment of 29 November 2017, Bilde v Parliament, T-633/16, EU: T: 2017: 849, Item 116*). No one, of course, thought to point this out to MEPs, and the ruling was in any case dated *after* the period in dispute, and indeed months after I had left the parliament and initiated my claim. Had I anticipated the risk, I could have kept appropriate records. But the more general advice of the lawyer was that it was unlikely a European court would rule against the parliament in a case like this. I reluctantly decided I had no option but to let it go – or to set out on retirement facing huge legal costs, high anxiety, and a very uncertain outcome.

The parliament's approach to news management in such cases is instructive. Back in 2017, when I was awaiting news of the parliament's decision in the case, I received a call from a Guardian journalist, Jennifer Rankin, asking me to comment on the parliament's decision. She had been informed of it, in considerable detail, including the proposal to recover the money from my

transitional allowance, ***before I was advised of the decision at all***. It was in the Guardian on June 13th, before the parliament advised me of its decision.³

This was a deliberate and vindictive attempt to inflict reputational damage against me personally, and by association against the Eurosceptic cause. The leak can only have come from the parliament – no one else had the information. I strongly suspect that I know the name of the MEP responsible, but without proof I'd better not mention it. I will say, though, that it's not the only time that Jennifer Rankin of the Guardian appears to have had prior inside knowledge of this type of decision. I complained to the European Ombudsman about the leaking of the decision. They agreed I had grounds for complaint, but were unable to take any action on it.

There have been several attempts in the media (including the one cited above) to suggest that I left the parliament ***because*** of the allegations of mis-spending. This is entirely wrong. There was no intention by the parliament to remove me from my MEP job, and no mechanism by which they could have done so. I retired because I was 73; because (as I believed) Brexit was a done deal – and because in the very month I retired, I had a triple heart by-pass.

I hasten to add that mine was by no means an isolated case. There were many. Two UKIP colleagues (I will not mention the names, for reasons of confidentiality) had staff funding disallowed, in one case causing a staffer to lose his job, despite ample evidence of the work he had done. They are facing "Recovery Orders" (that is, confiscations) on a comparable scale to myself.

Nor was the action limited to individuals. The parliament also funds "foundations" and "institutes" attached to parliamentary groups. UKIP formed part of the EFD (later EFDD) group, and had two such organisations, the ADDE and the IDDE. I was "President" of the ADDE – a purely formal figurehead position, requiring me to make the occasional speech, and to chair meetings of the Board. Again, the parliament made vague accusations of mis-spending by ADDE, and simply cut the funding (which was the great majority of the income). Again, staffers lost their jobs, and there was huge anxiety and a great deal of work, in which the accounts were scoured and most of the challenged items were justified. There were a few relatively small questionable items, but no justification for the wholesale closure. This case, unusually, went as far as the ECJ, which for once found in favour of the ADDE on most points in dispute.⁴

But they never give up. Despite the ECJ decision, I have a copy letter from OLAF, the European Fraud Office, dated as recently as December 23rd last, recommending the parliament to seek to recover a seven-figure sum from the ADDE. Given that the ADDE no longer exists, and has no premises, no bank account and no staff, this may be challenging.

No doubt the parliament would argue that it has a duty to ensure that funds are properly spent, and to prevent fraud and mis-spending, and few would disagree with that. Whether it should use its powers in an arbitrary, vindictive and improper way against perceived opponents is another matter.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/13/ukip-mep-resigns-amid-investigation-into-alleged-misuse-of-funds>

⁴ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/07/farage-fronted-group-of-meps-unfairly-treated-over-funds-rules-ecj-repay-anti-eu-parties>



Tim Aker

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The decision to leave the EU wasn't just right - it became inevitable. June 23rd 2016 put an end to the dithering over whether Britain would become a fully integrated member of the EU. It was a question the political class was forced to ask. Their hesitation over seeking full integration was because of the efforts of the guerrilla army of sceptics who cottoned onto the EEC from the beginning. For decades the public had been told the EU was just a trading arrangement. As the EU integrated, so did attitudes to it. The growth of sceptic groups cut dead the option of Euro membership. UKIP's surge secured the Referendum. Without Nigel Farage, it wouldn't have happened.

Since Britain's membership of the EEC in 1973, the European Economic Community had to hide behind euphemism. It was a 'Common Market', a title with no basis in fact or as a legal entity for the Union. The public thought they were joining a trading bloc, and supporters of political integration were never clear that the project was ever-closer political and economic union.

For most of those on the Right in the early '70s, who would come to be its biggest critics and take the lead on Eurosceptic campaigning, it was a means to transfer industrial issues upwards. If it was an EEC issue, so the argument went, the EEC could curtail the Trades Unions' grip on industrial policy and reform the economy. Up until the late 80s, for most Conservatives, the EEC was a way to impose a more liberal economic agenda on the continent.

It was such a naïve position and came back to haunt the Conservatives for decades to come. With the shoe on the Left foot in Brussels, a social Europe took more powers and pursued policies the Conservatives hoped they had eliminated.

The early 1980s presented a victory for Britain as Mrs Thatcher successfully negotiated a rebate. Future Conservative leaders would look at this and see a way to get change in Europe. Like most of the Thatcher years in politics, it was an aberration. With each Treaty came more competences transferred to the European centre, many of which were initiated with Thatcher's signing of the Single European Act.

Realising where the EU was headed, Mrs Thatcher opined famously at Bruges that her government had not rolled back the frontiers of the state only to see them imposed from Brussels. Finally, the penny dropped.

This is when the Europhiles struck. In 1989 Thatcher was forced to set a date for Britain to join the Exchange Rate Mechanism (the forerunner to the Euro) or her Chancellor and Foreign Secretary would resign, undoubtedly bringing the government down there and then. Both would resign a year later, precipitating her downfall.

After the coup, Britain's sovereignty hangs by a thread as Europhiles claim victory. Had those Conservatives, Teresa Gorman, Teddy Taylor, John Wilkinson, Nick Budgen, Christopher Gill, Richard

Body and Richard Shepherd not repeatedly taken a stand against their own party and withstood every threat of deselection, expulsion and defeat, then it is unlikely resistance to the European project would have had a future.

From outside the Tory Party, Sir James Goldsmith's Referendum Party became a national banner of resistance, a direct electoral threat to the Tories that UKIP and, towards the end of the battle, the Brexit Party were to occupy. Tory MPs with marginal seats would, from this point on, always look over their shoulder at the Eurosceptic challenge in their constituencies.

Had these forces, along with The Freedom Association, Bruges Group, Democracy Movement, Campaign for an Independent Britain and a host of other fringe and ginger groups not kept on banging on about Europe, the UK could have faced a position – warned by Lady Thatcher in November 1991 – where all three Westminster parties would support a single currency. Without Sir James, the Referendum Party and the Tory rebels, Britain may have entered the Euro in Blair's first term.

It may have been electorally disastrous to fight so openly, but for those picking at Major, they performed an essential service. John Major was as likely to take Britain into the Euro as Tony Blair was. Breaking every principle of party politics, they stood up to Blair *and* Major. They had heroically put country before party.

It may not have been the electoral boon it was to be in 2019, but the constant badgering on about the EU informed a sizeable chunk of the electorate who would understand and then get to the streets to agitate against the EU. This slow burn over decades, compared to the last minute pop-up pro-EU grassroots movement, was to prove more effective as the arguments kept being made. Pro-EU politicians missed a trick in not talking about the EU more or, rather, putting the questions earlier. It might not have stopped Brexit, but it might have pushed the EU to show more flexibility when negotiating a new 'arrangement' with David Cameron.

Any EU flexibility would not have changed the minds of the few constitutionalists, patriots, cranks and gadflies who faced scorn, ridicule and marginalisation for simply believing that our parliament at Westminster was better off being the originator of the rules by which we live. As the EU had its fundamental rules, so too did those who wanted out. Whether one subscribed to the notion that historical and constitution evolution had placed political power with the Crown in Parliament, or that sovereignty is the manifestation of our democratic rights to decide who governs us, membership of the EU was non-negotiable.

Furthermore, the EU never settled Britain's position within the EU, nor did Britain's governments face up to what the EU wanted to be, a single state with a common border, treasury, currency and means to keep the 'peace'. Governments of all colours held out hope they could change the direction of travel in the EU. They were wrong.

Britain was only able to leave the European because of this awkward, unanswered position. As a net contributor outside the Euro, the UK paid too much and had looser ties vis those that had integrated further. The UK was outside the common border area of Schengen (though, given immigration numbers, did it make any difference) and had opted out of some areas in Justice and Home Affairs and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. With each level of integration, Britain has slowed down its own pace of integration.

Constantly in the European Parliament, integrationist MEPs would barrack the Council for not integrating further. MEPs, led by Guy Verhofstadt, would demand an EU Treasury, an enforced EU border and common policies for asylum seekers as the burden fell on southern European states. With its flag, anthem, currency and 'rapid reaction force', it was as far removed from a Common Market as one could get. As they tried to integrate further, opinion in the UK turned against the political transformation of their 'common market'.

Bit by bit the old political taboos unwound, and the British public were able to debate immigration as EU freedom of movement manifested itself within British communities. Immigration had not been an issue until New Labour, a party that invented the policy of mass, controlled immigration. The Conservatives' embrace of the new Cool Britannia consensus in a globalised world made homeless those who felt uneasy about the pace of change in communities, the turnover in workforces, compression of wages and the lack of control. Whereas Thatcher had warned about all three parties favouring Euro membership, by 2010 all three parties now supported free movement within the EU. Worse, two of them were in power.

Nigel Farage understood the change more than anyone; Britain had lost control of its borders as it signed up to the "fundamental" right of freedom of movement. By 2013 the EURES job mobility portal was advertising one million British jobs across the EU, with some EU applicants entitled to grants to take up jobs and resettle in the UK. If the EU exports its unemployed, unemployment in the Eurozone goes down, so confidence in the Euro goes up. The UK was engaged in more than just a financial bailout of the EU and Eurozone.

In times of austerity, it was hardly a sound message to the electorate who had been left behind, who faced a government putting pain and cuts on them at home while sending money abroad. UKIP railed against this settlement when no one else would. The public started to listen.

In 2010 UKIP had fallen to three percent in the polls and come nowhere in the General Election. The 2014 European Elections were dominated by the ending of transition controls on Bulgarian and Romanian migration. This came after years of soaring migration from the EU. Again, it was a clear sign that free movement was a core component of EU membership. When the question was put, immigration was never going to be far from judgement on membership.

At the European Elections, UKIP became the first non-establishment party to win a national election. At the end of 2014 it had two MPs, returning one at the following year's election. It came third with 4 million votes and the Conservatives, by then, had several MPs committed to leaving the European Union and the Party itself had been pushed into supporting an In/Out Referendum. This was the point of no return.

UKIP had politicised mass EU migration, tied it to wage compression and the lack of control the government had to counter it. With a massive megaphone to disgruntled voters of all parties – and none – UKIP's polls were unavoidable.

The Tories talked a good game on migration but could never deliver. Cameron's proposal to bring net migration down to the tens of thousands was a rhetorical plan to win back voters from UKIP. What they didn't factor in was that the frequent migration numbers gave Farage and UKIP a delicious news peg to air the view that migration cannot be controlled in the EU. Cameron over-promised and under-delivered.

Repeatedly, the Tories tried to 'shoot UKIP's fox' by calling for a Referendum, as if that was enough. Rather, by asking the question to the public, they had opened Pandora's box and proved UKIP's tactics were working. Whereas in the days of Gorman, Gill and Taylor the thought of EU withdrawal was unthinkable, twenty years later, it was borderline inevitable.

Cameron's renegotiation was another attempt to shoot the purple fox. He missed altogether, further strengthening UKIP's claims that nothing would change in the EU. The EU didn't adapt to the changing mood in the UK either. Integrationist MEPs weren't going to let it, nor was a Commission fixed on ever-closer Union. When Cameron sought his renegotiation, he spoke of a new arrangement with the EU. Again, he over-sold his offering. When he returned with the slightest cosmetic change to benefits policy, it was evident there was going to be no new direction for the EU.

To believe the EU was going to change, however, is to misunderstand the EU. They were never going to budge. When the EU calls something fundamental, it is simply not up for negotiation, as David Cameron found out. Angela Merkel had grown up behind the most solid, totalitarian borders. Her psychological reaction was to tear all borders down. She was never going to give into demands to restrict rights of free movement. Any potential voices of resistance in the bloc were no doubt silenced by their status as net recipients of EU funds.

With little back from Brussels, the pent up frustrations of Eurosceptics were boiling over. For years politicians had been offering a vote on an EU issue. The referendum on the single currency was shelved after Peter Hain's Euro road show collapsed before departure. Blair had promised a referendum on the EU constitution, but this vanished after it was rebranded as the Lisbon Treaty. Gordon Brown's inept stage management, signing the Treaty hours after other EU leaders had, irked even more. Worse even than that, David Cameron's cast iron guarantee of a referendum on Lisbon rusted on the argument that the Treaty had already been signed. One can see how frustrated the electorate, who cared about the EU, had become.

Those advocating EU membership had not been honest about its goals from the start, and tried to hide the levels of political and constitutional integration that were to come were Britain to follow its neighbours. Preventing the nation having a say meant they feared, and knew they were heading for, defeat

While the Tories had won the election in 2015 claiming to have sorted out the economic mess, their Remain establishment resorted to pocket book politics and project fear. It was a complete miscalculation. To threaten that families risked losing thousands should Britain leave the EU was, to the millions without the thousands to lose, an empty message.

On referendum night, it was unsurprising to see the stockbroker belt come in for Remain. The left behind communities, one by one, came in for Leave. Working class communities, coastal communities, pit towns, forgotten enclaves, all made their voices heard on 23rd June 2016.

For decades, the political class had not been clear on political integration or free movement. New Labour said only tens of thousands would arrive when Eastern Bloc states joined the EU. The opposite happened. The people were meant to have a say on Treaties. The opposite happened. It was meant to be just about trade. The opposite happened.

Boris Johnson now reaps the rewards by sounding like Farage. In 2014, UKIP's platform was the Australian points-based system for controlling immigration. By 2019, it was the Tories mantra. By

2019, the Tories had become a Brexit Party, hoovering up former UKIP voters (who had been former Labour voters) to break Labour's Red Wall. The Brexit Party, by contrast, took voters from Labour who were simply never going to vote Tory. Brian Montieth in his articles for *The Scotsman* has generously called this the 'Thurrock Effect'. Its outcome was a Tory landslide not seen in over 30 years.

Since the UK's withdrawal, the Government has ruled out extending the transition and are talking up an Australian-style deal with the EU, which Trade Commissioner Hogan has described as a WTO Brexit by another name.

To look at how far the mood on the EU had changed in politics and government is to admire and respect the resilience of Nigel Farage and the thousands who fought beside him in UKIP and Brexit Party as well as the millions who joined and participated in the campaign groups all aiming for the cause the government appears to be advocating. (Sadly the same cannot be said of UKIP under Gerard Batten, which was eclipsed by the Brexit Party.)

It is not clear what trade agreements will be made with the EU, after the transition period. But the forces out there are now strong enough to ensure that, whatever happens, Britain will never re-join the European Union. We are finally free.