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An MEP's Job

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Richard Corbett describes the role of an MEP, and in particular how this compares to the role of an MP. He is spokesperson for the Party of European Socialists on the European Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee, and is also a substitute member on the Citizens' Rights, Justice & Home Affairs Committee. He has authored several books on Europe, including "The European Parliament", "A Socialist Policy for Europe", "The Treaty of Maastricht" and "Labour and 1996".

Members of the European Parliament are elected to deal with European issues.

MEPs represent regional constituencies and elections are by proportional representation, with each party offering a team of candidates.

An MEP's main task is to vote on European legislation, just as MPs vote on national legislation. However, MPs in many national parliaments do not shape legislation in the same way as MEPs. In some national parliaments, when a government publishes a bill, it is usually clear what will come out of the procedure – it is headline news if the parliament amends it against the will of the government. Some even claim that certain national parliaments are little more than rubber-stamps for their government's legislation.

This is certainly not the case in the European Parliament. A draft directive really is a draft – MEPs go through it paragraph by paragraph, amending it and rewriting it. So do the ministers in the Council, and ultimately the positions of the two must be reconciled in what (since the Amsterdam Treaty) amounts to a bicameral legislature at EU level. But the net effect is that every year, thousands of amendments to draft legislation put forward by ordinary back-bench MEPs end up on the statute books and apply in 25 different countries.

In national parliaments, being a backbencher, or an opposition party MP often offers very limited power and little job satisfaction other than the prospect of, perhaps, one day wielding ministerial power.

MEPs, on the other hand, while not having a career path to a ministry (though a surprising number do become ministers in their member states) can play a significant role in shaping legislation – a classical parliamentary function almost forgotten by some national parliaments.

The nature of day-to-day work is also different. One measure of a good MP in a national context is someone who is a good debater, able to score points over his or her opponents. An effective MEP is someone who is good at explaining, persuading and negotiating with colleagues from 25 different countries. This is done at three levels:

- Within political groups, as MEPs from different national parties work towards developing a common position as a group;
- With other groups in the Parliament, as no group has an overall majority and coalitions must be built. Indeed, the type of majority can vary from one issue to another as there is no predetermined coalition, but a general willingness to work by means of achieving substantial majorities on most issues;
- Once Parliament has a position, there is a need to negotiate with Council for the final outcome.

Such a style of Parliament leaves ample scope for an active MEP, providing that he/she is good at building the necessary majorities.

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