

Europe's Parliament: People, Places, Politics¹

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This synthesis aims to summarise the main arguments and ideas expounded by the authors².

Introduction

Sir Julian Priestley served four Presidents of the European Parliament as Secretary General of the institution – his latest book, written with Stephen Clark, allows readers to discover and rediscover this key EU institution. **The authors show people** who matter, **places** that are important, and **politics** as it happens in reality.

Their readers get a book which is structured into thirteen chapters with numerous photos from the Parliament's archives. **This synthesis puts a focus on three specific topics that correspond to the key words in the title of the book:** MEPs with visibility (“people”), the question of the seat of the parliament (“places”), and the European Parliament as an actor in the Political System of the European Union (“politics”).

In the preface (p. ix-xi), Jacques Delors points to the contribution of this book to help “understand this European adventure, the big steps as well as the small ones that must be taken” and recalls the “unique experience of dialogue and debate with fellow parliamentarians from other member states”.

1. People: Faces with visibility

People matter – especially in an elected Parliament that sometimes struggles to attract public attention. Faces can give visibility to the European Parliament and faces can gain visibility through their action in the European Parliament. But, the authors remind their reader that **a successful national life after being an MEP is the exception rather than the rule:** “for every Ana Palacio or Alexander Stubb there are dozens of their former colleagues who have sunk without trace.”³

The book lists “glittering prizes” for MEPs who make or have made career:

- **Shaping policy:** this can be done as **group coordinator** who tend to be longer serving MEPs and “there are unlikely to be directives from the group hierarchy as to the preferred choice” – unlike the case of **committee chairs** whose selection depends to a certain degree on mathematical chance. Committee chairs are, however, “prominent member[s] of the

¹ Stephen Clark and Julian Priestley, *Europe's Parliament: People, Places, Politics*. London: John Harper Publishing, April 2012, 432 pages.

² The views expressed in this work are not necessarily those of *Notre Europe*.

³ After having been an MEP since 1994, Ana Palacio served as Spanish Foreign Minister from 2002 to 2004. Alexander Stubb was an MEP from 2004 to 2008, then Finnish Foreign Minister, and has been Minister for Europe and Foreign Trade since 2011.

parliamentary elite and [...] recognised figure[s] within the Brussels bubble”; prominent examples given by the authors are Ken Collins at Environment, Giorgio Napolitano at the Constitutional Affairs committee and Elmar Brok at the Foreign Affairs committee.

- **Chairing an interparliamentary delegation**, one of the bilateral bodies of the European Parliament with a parliament of a third country: MEP Veronique De Keyser is shown monitoring elections in the desert in Sudan.
- **“Leading the home team”**: The authors only pose a rhetorical question: “who can doubt the influence of a leader like Hartmut Nassauer of the CDU, who until 2007 led a group of more than 50 German conservatives, a bloc larger than most of the political groups in the Parliament?”.
- Only a **group leader** holds more powers in his hands. They have considerable patronage for fellow MEPs as well as staff that ensures the running of the political groups that have their own secretaries-general. These functionaries form a group which is known as “the coordination” and constitutes “an essential part of the Parliament’s power structure.”
- **Having the confidence of one’s peers**: If this is the case, an MEP is in line to catch an office in the elections of the President, of fourteen vice-presidents and of six Quaestors that take place every two and a half years.

Interestingly, **French Presidents Giscard d’Estaing, Mitterrand, Chirac and Sarkozy⁴ have all been Members of the European Parliament**: Giscard d’Estaing from 1989 to 1993 after his term as President, Mitterrand in the pre-1979 assembly, Chirac immediately after the 1979 election for just under a year, and Sarkozy who had been MEP for two months “after the disastrous 1999 campaign, when he led the RPR to its worst ever defeat”.

Nationality matters in the supranational assembly of the European Parliament: this is no surprise, since the national parties control the election process. But the European political groups control the career prospects within the Parliament. Hence, the large national delegations in the political groups play a crucial role in the power games within the European Parliament and French politicians were people who have mattered.

2. Places: Where should the Parliament have its seat(s)?

The book looks at places – the numerous photos prove that. Many of them are known to insiders, but it seems impossible to know them all: the floral carpet of the principal bar and the secret tunnel under the river Ill in Strasbourg as well as Underground art sculptures in Brussels’ “PHS -2”. The word “places” also refers to **the question of the seat(s)⁵ which still occupies the Parliament** and has re-emerged on the agenda in 2011.

“Most countries in the world seat their executive and legislative branches of government together in their capital city – which is most commonly, but far from always, also their biggest city.” The authors continue: “The European Union, however, true to its reputation for being *sui generis*, has three seats for its Parliament alone, [...] and none of those is to be found in any of Europe’s biggest cities.”

Even if decided by the member states, **the Parliament could give an opinion on its seat in March 1958**. Explained in the book, in a “curious voting system” each member could vote for three out of five cities. The result was as follows: 170 votes for Brussels, 161 for Strasbourg, 155 for Milan, 153 for Nice, 99 for Luxembourg.

Clark and Priestley also explain why the European Parliament has remained and should remain “discreet” on the question: The Parliament tried to get more legislative powers during the intergovernmental conferences of the 1980s and 1990s. “A relatively positive attitude from Paris was a necessary precondition [...]. Putting Strasbourg’s fate in the balance would, in this view, have guaranteed failure.” In addition to that, treaty change requires unanimity. The authors conclude that

⁴ A special chapter “The French in Strasbourg: *Vive la Différence!*” is dedicated to French MEPs.

⁵ Since the Amsterdam Treaty a protocol “on the location of the seats of the institutions” is annexed to the treaties.

“[t]here will most likely be fewer amendments to the Treaty in the future: **a treaty change fixing a single seat for all the EU institutions is low on the scale of probabilities.**”

3. Politics: The inter-institutional game of a “sausage machine”

“‘Laws are like sausages. It’s better not to see them being made...’ Widely attributed to German statesman Otto von Bismarck [...] this quotation points to the fact that the making of laws frequently involves unsavoury ingredients best left unexamined.”

A rather unknown role in most national parliaments, **being a “rapporteur” on a piece of legislation can make or break a career in the European Parliament** (one of the rewards that is controlled by the European political groups). The authors find it useful to briefly recapitulate the **tasks of a rapporteur**:

- leading the procedure “of guiding a legislative proposal through the Parliament”;
- drafting the legislative report, “in fact a set of textual amendments accompanied by a short explanatory statement”;
- formulating amendments;
- negotiating compromise positions with the other political groups;
- making contact with Commission (to discuss consequences of amendments) and Council (“to trade politically on the ultimate shape of the text”);
- doing the necessary background research;
- consulting “with all those who should be consulted”;
- dealing with interest groups.

The book also provides a response on the follow-up question that could be something like “how are these guys appointed?”. When a legislative proposal is referred to a committee, **the committee appoints a rapporteur**. The appointing system “varies from committee to committee, but almost always involves some sort of ensuring proportionality between the political groups. Some systems are arithmetically quite sophisticated, with weighed points attributed for different sorts of parliamentary procedures, while others are relatively straightforward, such as the attribution of standing portfolios.” The political group then attributes the rapporteurship to one of its members. The other political groups usually appoint “**shadow rapporteurs**” who monitor the rapporteur and help determine the position of their respective political group.

Rapporteurs have a vast system of resources at their disposal. This includes staff of their own political group, the committee’s policy department, the General Secretariat of the Parliament, think-tanks and foundations associated with the political party, NGOs and interest groups as well as public affairs consultancies.

Clark and Priestley then turn to a couple of **pieces of legislation** and **tell their “story”** – examples are the REACH regulation, the Services directive, the Roaming regulation, the Port services directive and the Working Time directive: “A key rapporteurship can certainly make you very influential but equally a rapporteur’s reward must often be in heaven.”

Conclusion

Obviously the book addresses **many more People, many more Places, and more Politics** than could be included in this synthesis. If we look back to the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community that first met on 10 September 1952, **the European Parliament is turning sixty this year**. The next elections of the European Parliament take place in about two years’ time; Stephen Clark and Julian Priestley conclude by saying that “the **2014 elections** provide a chance to inject some democratic vitality into the somewhat wan structure of the European Union.” If their wish comes true, they might have to publish a second edition of their book earlier than they think.