

'MEPs: what are they for? Three of them put their case' from Le Monde (6 June 2004)

Caption: During an interview published on 6 June 2004 in the French daily newspaper Le Monde, the chairmen of three political groups in the European Parliament discuss the role and powers of the institution.

Source: Le Monde. 06.06.2004. Paris. "A quoi sert un député européen? Le plaidoyer de trois élus", auteur:Barón Crespo, Enrique; Bonde, Jens-Peter; Cohn-Bendit, Daniel , p. 8.

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MEPs: what are they for? Three of them put their case

Enrique Barón Crespo, Chairman of the Group of the Party of European Socialists (PES), **Jens-Peter Bonde**, Chairman of the Group for a Europe of Democracies and Diversities, and **Daniel Cohn-Bendit**, Chairman of the Group of the Greens, compare views on the role of the European Parliament.

Why do only 40 % of the public say that they are going to vote in the forthcoming European elections?

Jens-Peter Bonde: This is something of a paradox: turnout has fallen steadily over the last five elections from 63 % to 49 %, yet over the same period the European Parliament's powers have grown to such an extent that it now has a greater influence over people's daily lives than their own national parliaments. But people are more interested in their national parliaments, and prominent national political figures tend not to stand in the European elections, so I am predicting another considerable fall in turnout.

Don't people feel disaffected because the campaigns still focus on national issues?

Daniel Cohn-Bendit: That's not always the case. The European Greens' campaign is focused on Europe, on the Constitution, environment policy, GMOs and so on. And gay marriages, which Noël Mamère is campaigning for, are also a real-life issue in Europe. The situation varies from country to country, so Noël Mamère is fighting for legislation and freedom of sexual orientation to be harmonised from the top down.

J-PB: People in different countries have very different views on these issues. In Denmark, gay marriages have existed for a number of years, and we have moved much further ahead in this field than Catholic countries like Poland and Malta. We shouldn't have European legislation in these areas.

DC-B: It's not about having common legislation. In France, the battle is to change French law. But we have to find solutions with Europe in mind, because people are free to move around and work in Europe. What will happen if a homosexual couple from Denmark move to France or Italy with their children? When they cross the border, will they be told that their children are no longer theirs? Which tax and social security rules will they come under?

Enrique Barón Crespo: I am in favour of gay marriages and abortion, but I'm not going to conduct Mr Mamère's campaign for him. We would be better off dealing with real subjects that concern Parliament and that we can actually do something about, such as therapeutic cloning, subjects that have direct consequences for European research programmes. We are having a genuine debate with the Conservatives and the Greens on this issue, with tangible economic consequences for Europe.

But the European Parliament is not really making itself heard on these issues. Why do you think that this is?

EBC: In 1976, in the first issue of *El País*, there was a headline saying that the European Parliament supported democracy in Spain. Everyone knew what this meant: our actions have a tangible impact, whether it is our fight against mad cow disease, or our reports on the *Prestige* or on media concentration. But in elections you need a bit of drama, a cause to fight for, and we sometimes find this hard to get across to the public. If we explain that with the euro, the only body that can prevent excessively high bank charges is Parliament, everyone understands the issue. So we have to take the lead here and give people the clearest and simplest possible choices. But the media also have their share of responsibility. I am currently campaigning for the European Constitution, the Lisbon and Gothenburg Strategy [*which aims to achieve sustainable development and to make Europe the most competitive economy in the world*] and Europe's role in the world. I talk about all of these things, but the press only ever report what I say about Spain's domestic policy.

J-PB: Yes, the problem concerns not the European Parliament but the press. The media have only one or two journalists in Brussels to cover most of the legislation affecting their country, yet they have hundreds to cover national legislation. The result is that the Brussels legislation comes out of a sort of 'black hole'. No

one knows the outcome of votes in the Council because decisions are taken in secret by working parties made up of civil servants. No one follows the amendments proposed by the European Parliament, so there is no debate or awareness of what is going on at European level.

DC-B: For years now we have failed to create a European public space. Take, for instance, when the European Parliament defied the [European] Council and the Commission by rejecting the agreement signed with the USA about checks on the personal details of passengers on transatlantic flights. This is an emotive issue about individual freedoms, yet the subject was practically ignored. If the [French] Parliament questioned an agreement between the Government and the USA, there would be pages and pages written about it.

Do you have the impression that Parliament has matured and no longer spends its time ‘adopting resolutions on the Grenadines’, as Jacques Delors once accused it of doing?

EBC: If you want to joke about it, you could say that the European Parliament is a Tower of Babel that works, or a cross between the UN General Assembly and a university in May 1968. But let’s be serious here: there is a big gap between the clichés of the past that a lot of people are still peddling and the actual situation in reality. The decisions that we take have a fundamental impact on people’s lives in Europe. The way Parliament is organised into political groups works: in 90 % of cases decisions are taken on the basis of the MEPs’ political orientation rather than their nationality. We operate like a normal parliament.

DC-B: Come on, let’s stop talking nonsense. First you quote something that Jacques Delors said 35 years ago, and then we have a Eurosceptic like Jens-Peter Bonde saying that the European Parliament has more power than the national parliaments. What about the truth?

J-PB: The truth is quite simple: the Member States and national parliaments have lost a lot of powers, but these have gone not to the European Parliament but to civil servants at the Council and the Commission. The European Parliament doesn’t decide on legislation. It proposes amendments, which have a chance of being accepted by the Council, but only if the Commission approves them. So we’re not a real parliament.

DC-B: Would you prefer a federal Europe where the European Parliament did decide on legislation and the Commission was the government?

J-PB: I accept that the idea of a federal Europe is a democratic proposal — even if it’s not the option that I would choose — for tackling the democratic deficit in Europe. In any event, we should get rid of the current system of government by civil servants. I would also point out that, unlike the national parliaments, the European Parliament doesn’t appoint the government.

Yes, the appointment of the Commission President is not a key campaign issue, so you seem to have given up hope of having any power here ...

EBC: It’s not true that the European Parliament doesn’t care about the election of the Commission President. Jacques Santer and Romano Prodi had to fight for Parliament’s support. The subject is of great concern to us, and we succeeded in having a provision included in the draft Constitution that the Commission President would be elected by Parliament. In any event, the next President will have to win broad support from Parliament, and he or she cannot be appointed without the backing of the Socialist Group.

DC-B: We’ll have to wait and see. If, as rumour has it, the European Council proposes Wolfgang Schäuble as Commission President, he will be rejected by Parliament. Likewise, Guy Verhofstadt will lose the regional elections and be seen as a loser all round. He will be rejected both by the British in the Council, who will find him too federalist, and by the European Parliament, which will find him too liberal. Parliament will exercise its power, and the election of the Commission President will be a lot more difficult than everyone thinks ...

You are campaigning without naming the parties with which you intend to form an alliance. Will there be a grand, power-sharing coalition between the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the European People's Party (EPP)?

DC-B: I shall fight to the bitter end to ensure that there is a centre-left or centre-right majority, but definitely not a grand coalition. Parliament's first vote, when it elects its President, will be very symbolic. It would be fatal to begin the first parliamentary term of office in an enlarged Europe with a marriage of elephants merely to suit the German Christian Democrats and Social Democrats [*who want to share the major offices in the European Parliament between them*].

Mr Barón Crespo, do you share this view?

EBC: That depends. Last time we took a progressive, pro-European line against the right, but Daniel Cohn-Bendit and the Greens did not support the Socialist candidate. The Greens seem to be doing a U-turn at the moment, now that we have started campaigning. We want a progressive, pro-European majority. In Spain, we have set an example by including the Greens on our list. That is what Daniel Cohn-Bendit seems to want.

How will you get along in the new Parliament, with MEPs' salaries varying by a factor of up to ten, and flat-rate expenses that have provoked a press campaign in northern Europe?

J-PB: We bear some of the responsibility for the voters' apathy. If the European Parliament had put its house in order, we would have encouraged voters to come out and vote. The problem is that the majority in neither the Socialist Group nor the EPP Group were ready for such a reform. I hope that after the elections we shall have a majority in favour of a system in which the expenses actually incurred are reimbursed.

DC-B: If we are to reform the system for reimbursing expenses, we need a new Statute for MEPs. Some of them will be earning EUR 600 per month and others EUR 11 000. This is going to create a bad atmosphere.

J-PB: I don't think that we should have a single salary. If you give a Czech MEP EUR 9 000 a month, as has been proposed, he'll be able to collect his cheque in Brussels, but if he tries at home, they'll throw him out, because no Czech would agree to him earning five times the salary of the country's President ...

DC-B: Having a single salary seems like a good idea, but it isn't. However, the European Parliament does need to rebalance things in favour of those earning the least by paying them EUR 2 500 per month, say. If we do that it will be easier to secure a majority in favour of changing to the reimbursement of costs actually incurred.

J-PB: I could agree to this compromise, because it's important for Parliament to put its house in order.

EBC: I would point out that we in Parliament approved a single Statute for MEPs, but four countries — France, Germany, Austria and Sweden — blocked the plans. They still haven't explained why they opposed this reform. It is up to them to make a move. I hope that they will change their minds and that Parliament can adopt reforms of the Statute and the expenses system at the same time.

Daniel Cohn-Bendit

Chairman of the Group of the Greens in the European Parliament, Daniel Cohn-Bendit headed the Green list in France in 1999. This year, however, he is standing in Germany, in the city of Frankfurt, where he lives. Born in France in 1945 but of German nationality, the leader of the May 1968 revolution was expelled from France by General de Gaulle. He then became a teacher and bookseller at the Karl Marx Buchhandlung in Frankfurt's alternative society in the 1970s. It was during this period that he struck up a friendship with the current Foreign Affairs Minister, Joschka Fischer. In the 1990s he condemned the absolute pacifism of Germany's Greens, which were opposed at that time to any military intervention in Yugoslavia.

Jens-Peter Bonde

Born in 1948 in Denmark, Jens-Peter Bonde is the leader of the Eurosceptics in the European Parliament. He has a degree in political science and since 1972 has co-founded a number of Eurosceptic movements in Denmark, having worked, among other things, to persuade Danes to reject the Maastricht Treaty in 1991. He has been an MEP throughout the period since 1979 and is Chairman of the Group for a Europe of Democracies and Diversities. As an active member of the Convention, he opposed the text of the Constitution drafted under Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. One of his key concerns is transparency in the European decision-making process, and he is highly critical of a Europe where decisions are, in his view, taken by civil servants.

Enrique Barón Crespo

Aged 60, this Spanish former university professor has been Chairman of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament since 1999. In the 1970s, he was a lawyer specialising in labour law and a defence counsel in political cases. A Member of the *Cortes* from 1977 to 1986, he became a member of Felipe González's government and was Minister for Transport, Tourism and Telecommunications from 1982 to 1985. He has been an MEP since 1986 and was President of the European Parliament from 1989 to 1992. He was Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs from 1992 to 1995 and is now also standing in the elections, but he will be handing over his position as leader of the Socialists to the German, Martin Schulz.