
Be proud of the work of our MEPs

guardian.co.uk, Thursday 23 February 2012 21.00 GMT

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)

[Article history](#)

We are deeply disappointed that [Jack Straw](#) has resurrected his old chestnut of abolishing the European parliament because of low voter turnout ([Report](#), 22 February). The European parliament is directly elected precisely because the 1970s system of sending a delegation of MPs and peers to Strasbourg was manifestly undemocratic and ineffective.

Today, the parliament of 27 nations has equal decision-making powers with the council of ministers and works amazingly well and does an effective job in holding the European commission to account. It is an exceptional achievement in a continent so often previously scarred by war. To return to the past would mean that legislative scrutiny could at best only be cursory because of the constraints of MPs attempting to do two jobs.

Given European election campaigns that concentrate on national issues and a Eurosceptic media added to an impenetrable electoral system (courtesy of Mr Straw), it is no surprise that turnouts are low. Does Mr Straw also advocate the abolition of local government, where voter turnout is also low?

Members of the European parliament listen to the voices of the citizens who elect them and have scored numerous successes in amending proposed legislation for the better, including data protection, anti-discrimination, services sold across borders, testing of chemicals, clear water and air, and yes, importantly, working time and health and safety. All of these of necessity are more effectively regulated across borders, requiring European legislation.

We should be proud of the work of most of our MEPs, not disrespect them.

Anita Pollack, **Carole Tongue**, **Glenys Kinnock**, **Mel Read**, **Eryl McNally**, **Ken Collins** *Former MEPs*, **Joyce Quin** *Former MEP and former [Europe](#) minister*, **Neil Kinnock** *Former European commissioner*, **David Harley** *Former deputy secretary general, European parliament*, **Roger Liddle** *Former adviser to European commissioner Peter Mandelson*, **Neal Lawson** *Compass*, **Michael Rubenstein**, **Luke Akehurst**, **Dr Robin Wilson**, **Cllr Wes Streeting**, **Professor George Irvin Soas**, **Patrick Diamond** *Policy Network*, **Matthew Sowemimo** *Former research director, European Movement UK*, **Federico Guerrieri**, **Niccolo Milanese** *Co-president, European Alternatives*, **Alessandro Valera** *Research manager, European Alternatives*

- Jack Straw calls for the abolition of the European parliament and a return to an EU assembly composed of representatives from national parliaments. This is not a new idea, but it is a surprise to see this argument coming from a senior and pro-European British politician, and hence must be taken seriously. Here are three areas where the former foreign secretary gets it wrong.

First, it is easy to forget how ineffectual the European parliament (EP) was before 1979. We abandoned the old model because few national MPs took seriously their responsibilities in Brussels. And demands on MEPs are far greater now than they were in 1979, with the expanded policy agenda of the EU, the extensive legislative powers of the European parliament, and the expansion of the EU single market to 27 countries and 500 million citizens. Asking MPs to sit in Westminster and Brussels would only serve to weaken democratic control over the EU's decision-making by having politicians with only a partial interest in the work of the parliament they were sitting in.

Second, Straw ignores how successful the European parliament has been in some areas. Any objective assessment of the use of powers by the European parliament points to an improvement in EU governance because of European parliament action, from holding the commission (and commissioners) to account, to improving EU-wide legislation and even standing up to the European council and the US government over the sharing of European citizens' personal data with the US as part of the Swift agreement. Of all the EU institutions, it's the parliament that is increasingly making more sophisticated decisions in the interests of its citizens. Approximately 25% of amendments to legislation proposed by the European parliament end up as law, which is considerably more than any national parliament in Europe, where majorities are whipped into line to vote for unamended government bills.

Third, yes, few British citizens know who their MEPs are or bother to vote in EP elections, but this has more to do with the way MEPs are elected in the UK than with the EP per se. Since 1999 British MEPs have been elected by a form of regional party-list PR, where voters can choose between parties but cannot choose between individual politicians. Most other EU countries – including Ireland, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden, Belgium, Slovenia, Latvia, and Estonia – use a form of PR which allows voters to choose between candidates from the same political party. When politicians from the same party have to compete with each other for votes they spend more time campaigning directly to citizens, and as a result citizens from countries who have such preferential voting systems are more likely to be contacted by MEPs and receive information during EP elections than are citizens in countries with the British systems. It is no coincidence that voter turnout in EP elections is higher in these other countries.

In short, British politicians should stop blaming the European parliament for the failure of British politicians and the British media to educate people about the European parliament or the failure of UK governments to introduce a better system for electing British MEPs.

Professor Simon Hix

London School of Economics and Political Science

- I was surprised and disappointed to read in the Guardian of Jack Straw's view that the directly elected European parliament should be wound up. Jack is undoubtedly correct to say that the parliament has not yet adequately fulfilled its mission to connect

the European citizens with the EU decision-making process. While the EP must take its share of the blame for this failure, so too must national governments, political parties and the media who conspicuously underreport the work of the parliament.

The answer, however, is not to abolish the parliament but to better understand the vital work it does in bringing much-needed scrutiny to the EU decision-making process.

A recent salient example is the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (*Acta*), the international agreement between the EU and 10 countries aimed at tackling global commercial-scale counterfeiting and piracy. *Acta* was agreed by all the EU member states and would now be adopted if the EP was not required to give its consent. Citizens concerned about *Acta*'s impact on internet freedom have been bombarding MEPs with emails (I have been receiving some 500 a week for the last six weeks or so). As a result the EP is giving close consideration to *Acta*. *Acta* has generated massive media coverage across Europe, particularly in Poland and France, but (with the exception of the Guardian and FT) hardly a word in the mainstream UK media. This scrutiny has led six member states to suspend ratification of a document they previously happily signed up to.

Whether the EP now says yes or no to *Acta*, we will have fulfilled our role of bringing democratic scrutiny to an important EU decision.

A similar example is the action the EP took to end the scandal of details of individual's financial transaction being sent to the US authorities without any human rights safeguards. This so-called Swift arrangement was signed off by member state governments, but put an end to by the European parliament.

David Martin MEP

Labour, Scotland

- Jack Straw has been a fixture of British politics for more than 30 years, consistent in his moderate Euroscepticism, effective as foreign secretary in opposing, whenever possible, democratic institutional reform in the EU, and whose views of the parliament have oscillated between the critical and the unprintable.

In his call at the IPPR conference for the EP to be abolished and replaced with "an assembly of national parliaments" he displays a nostalgia for a parliamentary construct in the EU which was tried between 1958 and 1979 and which failed. Part-time European parliamentarians with national mandates and duties were unable to carry out their largely consultative functions then. How could a dual mandate MP/MEP possibly cope now in the era of generalised co-decision, with the EP scrutinising and sharing in responsibility for practically all EU laws, ensuring full public accountability of the commission to parliament and parliamentary oversight of the EU's external and trade activities? The answer is that such an assembly would be a fig leaf for democratic control, making life easier certainly for diplomats and bureaucrats and, indeed, foreign ministers, but totally incapable of shaping EU decisions.

The problem for the parliament is not a lack of powers, of competences or seriousness in the way it carries out its democratic responsibilities. Any objective assessment of the use it has made of its powers to improve sometimes very complicated legislation, to hold the commission to account and to make EU financing more transparent, would have to recognise that the parliament is playing the kind of role for which it was set up, and for which we have elections.

The real difficulty resides in addressing not a democratic deficit but a participation deficit. It would be helpful of course if national media were to follow the work of the EP more seriously. But the key has to be the transforming of the elections to the European parliament into clear choices about Europe's future, with European parties offering competing programmes which could start the process of making those elections genuinely European. The record of Mr Straw and his colleagues in office was to campaign half-heartedly at best during European elections, and preferably to avoid throughout any mention of Europe – with the dismal outcomes that we all remember. If high-profile national politicians give the impression that there is nothing relevant at stake in an election, then why should voters put themselves out?

Now he comes up with a simple solution; abolish the EP altogether. Needless to add that such a proposal would require the unanimous agreement of all member states – a precaution for constitutional change upon which Mr Straw always insisted – and will therefore simply not happen. The next elections to the EP take place in spring 2014 – politicians anxious to bridge "the divide between the European people and the European Union" should devote their energies to making those elections a success, rather than floating half-baked ill-thought-out ideas which were already discredited 40 years ago.

Julian Priestley

Former secretary general of the European parliament, 1997-2007

- It is interesting to hear Jack Straw complaining of a "democratic deficit" with reference to the European parliament. Here in Scotland we are only too aware of the feelings of political frustration and impotence engendered by such a deficit. The UK is governed by a coalition of the parties that came third and fourth in our elections; a perverse inversion of the distribution of power, with the PM's party currently represented by one MSP in Holyrood. If we were not listened to when we protested against the Iraq misadventure to a Labour government we helped into power, how loud would our voice be now if we were to protest against military intervention in Iran or Somalia when there are practically no votes at stake for the coalition? It beggars belief that people fell for David Cameron's PR stunt in coming to Edinburgh to plead for the UK status quo. He knows that the more Margaret Thatcher's heir pleads for a political cause, the more the people of Scotland will reject it. Haste ye back, David!

Colin Hall

Dundee

- Abolishing the European parliament as Labour's Jack Straw advocates would not solve the European Union's alleged democratic deficit.

It is unsurprising that only 8% of people believe that their voice counts in the EU given the conspiracy of silence among Westminster-centred politicians and media when it comes to the decisions made by democratically elected MEPs. MEPs in the European parliament make European law in conjunction with UK ministers in the European Council, but because this process does not take place in London it is not news. Even the BBC is now planning to further cut its coverage of the EU decision-making progress by axing The Record Europe, its only remaining weekly programme exclusively dedicated to the work of MEPs and their interaction with the other EU institutions. In the absence of informed media coverage of the work MEPs do, it is small wonder that people do not feel the urge to go out and vote in European

elections. Does Jack Straw also advocate abolishing local councils and indeed the House of Commons as a solution to political disengagement and low voter turnout?

Fiona Hall MEP

Leader of the Liberal Democrat delegation in the European parliament

- This package of letters was amended on 24 February 2012, to add the letter above from Fiona Hall MEP

© 2012 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.

European parliament should be abolished, says Jack Straw

Straw argues directly elected body has 'major democratic deficit' as poll shows 78% believe their voice doesn't count in EU

Patrick Wintour

guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 21 February 2012 18.01 GMT

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)

[Article history](#)



Jack Straw argues that an assembly of national parliaments should replace the existing European setup.

Photograph: Stefan Wermuth/Reuters

The directly elected European parliament should be abolished after failing to achieve its purpose of bridging the divide between the European people and the European Union, the former foreign secretary Jack Straw has said.

He was speaking at an Institute for Public Policy Research seminar at which poll findings were released showing only 8% of the population believe their voice counts in the European Union, with 78% disagreeing.

The thinktank has launched a project on the future of Europe that is certain to influence Labour thinking.

Straw said: "I am now clear that there is a major democratic deficit within the EU. And it is absolutely certain, in my judgment, that the mechanism that was established 30 years ago to fill this gap of the democratic deficit, which was a directly elected European parliament, has not worked and, in my judgment, cannot work in that form. And the paradox is that as the European parliament has been given more powers it has become less, not more, legitimate and that is shown by the drop in the average [election] turnout across Europe."

He said the European parliament should be replaced by an assembly of national

parliaments. He pointed out that turnout in European parliament elections had fallen across Europe and reached little more than 40% even in Germany.

The EU had been a "system of political elites leading people by the nose that worked when it delivered jobs and welfare".

"We've got to argue that the EU should not be involved in issues like the working time directive, health and safety and so on. I am in favour of much that is in those instruments but what I'm not in favour of is having a single, one-size-fits-all instrument which works on the presumption that there will be single, one-size-fits-all enforcement when nothing of the kind takes place."

He said the Labour priority should be the completion of the single market, adding: "It is also clear that the priorities the EU political elites continue to focus on are taking us away from core areas, such as tackling terrorism and international crime, where the public does in fact support close pan-European co-operation. Tackling this dichotomy at the heart of the EU will be critical if the union is to not only survive the euro crisis but also avoid an even more serious democratic crisis.

"People understand the value of the EU, what it has produced, but they also understand that it should concentrate on those things of value and pull back from those things that can best be left to domestic parliaments and governments. So, to use a cliché, it has got to do less but it's got to do better".

Straw's argument was buttressed by IPPR poll findings, researched by YouGov-Cambridge, showing that significant numbers believe the EU should co-operate more closely on terrorism and international crime (67%), climate change (52%), poverty (51%) and immigration (45%).

In contrast, a majority or a large minority think EU countries should loosen links on national budgets (57%), laws on trade unions and strikes (54%), agriculture (57%) and weights and measures (48%).

Voters also reject institutional changes, such as the introduction of an elected EU president (23% in favour, 47% against), a European army (15%, 57%) or a single seat at the UN (11%, 59%).