

# What does an MEP really do?



**WHEN TRAVELLING** around Europe preaching about the European Union I often get asked what an MEP does for a living. Existential questions are never easy to answer.

In the beginning of my career I used to mumble something about directives and regulations, but I soon noticed that people were staring at me, with a slightly bored look, as if they neither understood nor cared.

Who can blame them? Drafting a directive on the speedometers of two- to three-wheeled motor vehicles does not sound like much fun. Well, unless you are trying to sell a Vespa from Rovaniemi to Parma and the Italian authorities stop you at the border because your speedometre does not fulfill their national standards.

**I realised** that if I can't explain my job to my friends, it means that I don't understand what I actually do for living. On reflection, I've come to the conclusion that an MEP has three main tasks.

First and foremost we are legislators. We draft European laws which aim to facilitate the free movement of people, services, goods and capital in Europe. In an ideal world, we're trying to make life easier for all Europeans. I guess we don't always succeed, but at least the aim is noble.

Today, the Parliament is a co-legislator with the Council of Ministers. As a matter of fact an active MEP has more power over EU affairs than a national minister. An MEP can truly influence and change legislation. Everytime the European Commission makes a proposal the parliamentarians want to leave their own signature on it.

Secondly, we are EU spokesmen. Part of our job is to promote public discourse on European affairs. All too often the EU feels like some kind of an extraterrestrial organisation far away from Brussels. MEPs can and should be engaged in the EU debate – and I don't care whether it's for or against integration. The key is to keep the debate going. Modern communication leaves no excuses for the lazy MEP. Blogs, columns, FaceBook and public

appearances are a great way to bring EU issues out into the public.

Thirdly, an MEP is there to drive certain interests. Legally, we do not represent a specific member state, but I guess I would be lying if I said I didn't wear my national hat from time to time. Of course I do. Not least during the vodka wars....

Nevertheless, we don't sit in national groups but in seven different political groups, ranging from the extreme Left to the extreme Right. And 99 per cent of the time I vote with my political group. But if some Finnish interests are at stake, naturally I will defend them.

**The job** of an MEP is as international as it gets. With 27 member states and 23 official languages, there's not a dull moment in Brussels. Yet it's fair to say that most Europeans cannot name more than two out of 785 MEPs. It's a pity. Really. And not just because some 15 per cent of all MEPs are former presidents, prime ministers, commissioners and ministers.

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It's a shame because the Parliament is a legislative powerhouse. Some claim that over 50 per cent of national legislation has its roots in Brussels. Be as it may, the European Parliament has a lot of influence on day-to-day law making.

We might not be dealing with the core of the welfare state. Healthcare, schools, childcare and pensions are still national and local affairs. But most macro- and many microeconomic decisions take place in the European Parliament. It would be a travesty for democracy if they went unnoticed.

So, go for it. Start hassling your MEP. That's what we're for. A good place to start is on [www.europarl.eu](http://www.europarl.eu). ■■

**Alexander Stubb is an MEP who thinks that he knows what he's doing.**