

Toby Wardman

Writing sample

In 2005's party conference season, I was asked to write a daily column from the Labour Party Conference in Brighton for New Statesman magazine's website. This is an extract. The original articles are no longer available online.

Missing EU

As government institutions go, the European Union is a relatively new beast. It would be as well to remember that fact when we wonder why Westminster policy-makers so often neglect the EU, or why they treat European-level decisions as a subset of 'foreign affairs' rather than considering them as genuine policy issues in their own right. Or, indeed, when we worry that so many people are ill-informed, confused or downright suspicious about 'Brussels'.

In the same vein, our national institutions haven't quite adjusted themselves to the existence of a political world outside Westminster. Nowhere is this more obvious than in conference season, which is carefully timed to fall in the middle of Parliament's whopping great recess so as to make sure MPs can all attend – but which this year clashes with a plenary session of the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

Of course, the Labour Party conference - by all accounts Europe's largest party-political gathering – can hardly be expected to rework its schedule around the needs of eighteen Labour MEPs. But nor can the European Parliament – by all account the world's largest transnational elected body – be expected to rework its schedule around a party conference in just one member state. When you look at it that way, I guess it's just surprising that the Brighton/Strasbourg clash hasn't happened sooner.

The long and short of it is that MEPs can't go to conference this year. This kind of exclusion, however unwitting, is hardly something they're unfamiliar with. Indeed, MEPs from all countries have the same problem when it comes to their national elections: what they really want to be doing in the run-up to a general election is pounding the tarmac back home, working to get their comrades elected. But the European Parliament doesn't stop for domestic elections in all the member states; if it did, it'd never actually get to do any work.

I don't want to paint MEPs as some kind of gloomy, Eeyorish bunch, quietly resigned to their fate as second-class residents of the political village. On the contrary, possibly with the exception of fringe groups like UKIP, they are acutely aware of the importance of the legislative work they do. Which is why, to a man, they'll choose the cold, austere Strasbourg hemicycle over the legendary smoke-filled rooms of the Brighton Grand.

It's not just MEPs who are affected. The growing army of lobbyists and campaigners who descend on Strasbourg lawmakers every month are to some extent the same groups who might otherwise be descending on conference. The same goes for the media, who now have an excuse to pay even less attention to what goes on in Strasbourg – and this is a bit of a worry in a week when a debate will take place over one of the most controversial bits of legislation in recent years, a proposed EU-wide chemicals testing programme. And – dare I say it? – those of us who do make it to conference may find our debates just a little impoverished by the absence of that unique perspective that Labour Members of the European Parliament bring with them.

There are, thankfully, some small compensations. In the absence of elected members, it is the solemn duty of their assistants (and press officers) to represent them in Brighton at all their various meetings and seminars. One engagement looks particularly taxing in that regard: Richard Corbett is vice-president of the All-Party Parliamentary Beer Group, campaigning for British real ales, and it will fall to

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me to represent him at the reception he's hosting in absentia. With all the burdens and responsibilities that entails. It's a tough job, but hey, someone's got to do it.