

Five minutes with Mats Persson: “National parliaments are the solution to the EU’s democratic deficit”

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*European Parliament elections are due to be held in May 2014. Ahead of the elections, EUOPP’s Managing Editor Stuart Brown spoke to **Mats Persson**, the Director of Open Europe, about his views on the European Parliament, the role of national parliaments in the integration process, and whether the efforts to reform the European Union advocated by British Prime Minister David Cameron are likely to be successful.*



European Parliament elections have traditionally been regarded as ‘second order’ elections with low levels of voter turnout. Do you think that the elections in 2014 have the potential to be different?

I think there are two aspects to that question. On the one hand it’s true that Europe has become a hot topic in several countries, primarily because of the Eurozone crisis. In the UK, Europe is a hot topic for slightly different reasons, but certainly Europe has sailed up the agenda as a political issue.

The Eurozone debate is now about issues which previously were very much determined at the national level, including taxation and spending. The Eurozone crisis has put the focus on quite fundamental and profound issues around fiscal policy. This is usually the domain of national politics and national elections, but it now has a European angle to it. So therefore we could draw the conclusion that voters should take more interest in European elections.

However there’s a second element, which is that precisely because the key European decisions are now about taxation and spending, the pendulum in terms of EU decision-making has swung back towards national capitals rather than Brussels. As national governments are now the key drivers of EU decisions, the European Parliament elections might simply be a case of business as usual: low voter turnout and limited interest for citizens.

Over the last few decades, the European Parliament’s powers have been strengthened in an attempt to reduce the EU’s alleged ‘democratic deficit’. Do you support this principle, or would you argue that other reforms, such as increasing the role of national parliaments in the EU’s legislative process, would be a better option?

I think national parliaments are indeed the solution to the EU’s infamous democratic deficit. For me, there is a lot of evidence pointing in that direction. No doubt the European Parliament can do good things – and it has made real achievements with certain pieces of legislation – but it’s a hugely significant indicator that ever since the first European elections in 1979 voter turnout has consistently fallen. This has happened over the same period in which the European Parliament’s powers have increased.

To me, that’s highly problematic because we would expect the exact opposite relationship. We would expect that as the Parliament has increased its powers, voters would respond by voting in greater numbers, while recognising the Parliament as a genuine democratic body which they should engage with. Now that has not happened, which would suggest that there is still a large disconnect between voters and the European Parliament, despite the Parliament being democratically elected. It’s difficult to bridge that gap when we have 28 vastly different countries and political cultures in the European Union.

In terms of the mechanism through which this might take place, national parliaments recently issued a ‘yellow card’ to the European Commission over proposals for a European Public Prosecutor’s Office. Would strengthening this procedure go some way to resolving the democratic deficit?

This is an interesting case actually. We had 15 parliamentary chambers in 11 different EU countries objecting to the Commission's proposal for a European Public Prosecutor's Office. That is interesting because we often hear that people are sceptical of this idea of having national parliaments coming together with greater powers to block proposals with a so called 'red card'. People tell us that it's difficult for national parliaments to agree, that they have vastly different interests, and that in most cases they could never come to an agreement.

What happened with the European Public Prosecutor's Office is a clear example of national parliaments being able to come to a consensus. So clearly they can agree when the European Commission overreaches, however under the current framework it's possible for the Commission to effectively ignore the will of national parliaments, and that might well take place in this case. It's a complex situation, but the way I read it is that it means we need to enhance the 'yellow card' and turn it into a 'red card' in which national parliaments have an effective veto, with no way out for the Commission if enough parliaments object.

The UK is in the process of conducting a review of the balance of competences between the British and European levels, with other countries such as the Netherlands also carrying out similar assessments. Do you think these are worthwhile exercises that might lead to tangible reforms?

Well if you look at the first batch of the balance of competence reports in the UK, most of them concluded that the status quo is broadly acceptable: that the balance of power is fairly satisfactory in the areas which were examined. Now I know that certainly some people on the continent drew the conclusion that this means the situation is settled, and that nothing more needs to be done, but of course in reality that's not the case. Nevertheless it's interesting that this was perceived as being an exercise which would throw some red meat to the Eurosceptics, but to date it has probably served the interests of those who would like the UK to stay in the EU, even on the current membership terms.

So these processes can work in all kinds of ways. We certainly shouldn't be afraid of a robust debate based on evidence. And I do think that it's a worthwhile exercise in the sense that it does something which should have been done a long time ago: it tries to map out the exact influence and impact of the European Union on, in this case, the British economy and society. It's an issue which is very poorly understood, as nobody really knows where the limit between national and EU powers actually lies. We don't know what percentage of our laws originate at the European level, for example. All of these are questions which should be explored.

I also like the Dutch review because while it didn't recommend any sizeable changes, it did have a good discussion of what the EU should and should not be involved in. For example, it suggested that there should be some mechanism for member states to challenge European Court of Justice rulings, which I think is a very sensible idea. It's one of the areas where at the moment there is a bit of a democratic blind spot.

They also suggested that EU structural funds should be limited to relatively poor areas and regions of countries. They should not be recycled among some of the richest EU member states and some of the richest countries in the world. It makes no sense whatsoever for London, Stockholm, Helsinki and Paris to be sending money to each other via Brussels. That is not a rational exercise and is clearly a case where the principle of subsidiarity should be used.

Do you think it's likely that David Cameron's attempts to reform the EU can succeed?

There are a lot of misunderstandings about David Cameron's position, partly because the Conservative Party haven't been very effective at setting out exactly what they hope to achieve. Some of this is understandable because you don't want to set up 'red lines' and give the game away before negotiations start. But part of that is also down to poor communication.

Now there's a perception in some quarters of Europe that what Britain wants is basically to exercise some sort of 'dawn raid' on Brussels: to move in swiftly one morning, get their cargo, and get out again. In other words, there's a belief that the UK wants a unilateral repatriation of powers, irrespective of what's going on in Europe. But that's not

quite where the discussion is at. It may be that some people would like that type of approach, but the majority would like to see EU-wide changes.

So it's not so much the unilateral repatriation of powers, but rather a series of sweeping changes which could include the EU doing less, and doing it better. It could include strengthening democratic controls, as we've discussed, with national parliaments becoming more involved. It might also involve ensuring that the Eurozone does not write the rules for the rest of the EU, for example, using their majority in the Council of the European Union. It could entail some quite positive, pro-active measures as well, including removing barriers to trade in services, particularly professional services such as the legal professions, and to some extent retail, which is heavily regulated. To this we could add issues such as free trade deals with the rest of the world.

All of this could be part of Cameron's reform package, and if you frame it like that – as a way to make the EU more streamlined, more focused on the things it does best, such as trade, and as a mechanism for making the EU as a whole work better – then certainly I think he has every chance. My best guess is that we'll get something sensible in the end, which is in both the EU and Britain's interest.

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