

Stefan Eck: It's too soon to judge the EU's success

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Interviews

Stefan Eck on his passion for golf, why it's too soon to judge the EU's success and why he believes that rabbits are the forgotten species of EU animal welfare laws.



Stefan Eck | *Photo credit: Natalie Hill*

Margaret Thatcher had her handbag, Gandhi his famous stick.

German MEP Stefan Eck is arguably best known for the black beret, without which he is rarely seen. But the affable GUE/NGL deputy has more in common with the two aforementioned iconic figures than you might think.

For Thatcher's steely determination, read Eck's still-firm belief in the long-term future of the EU and, for Gandhi's passionate zeal, read the deputy's avid campaigning for animal rights.

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The comparisons may to some appear contradictory but, then again, Eck does not fit easily into any one political mould. He's also relatively new to the machinations of Brussels, having been an MEP only since 2014. His background is in advertising and, more recently, art; he designs bronze sculptures.

Eck's late father was a lawyer, his mother a secretary. He's been married to his Thai-born wife for 30 years, though the couple have no children, a decision he says he took at the ripe old age of 14 when he saw the Pulitzer-winning photo of a naked girl fleeing a napalm attack in Vietnam.

He was so struck, he says, by the photo's graphic message - "the world can be such a destructive place" - that he decided there and then that he'd never have children. "I have kept my promise," he says. "It was quite shocking for me to see that image, how people can be so cruel to each other, and I just thought how could I bring a child into such a cruel world?"

When asked if he has any regrets, he replies without hesitation, "No. The world is probably an even more dangerous place today than it was back then. Indeed, I think the world's never been closer to going over the abys than it is now."

Listening to Eck, it is perhaps not difficult to share his pessimism. "It's estimated that by 2050 the world's population will have grown to 9.7 billion. How are we going to feed all those people? How are we all going to live in peace together?"

"Today, in terms of consumption we use the planet as if there were two Earths, not one. All this scares me very much." It may come as little surprise, then, to hear him say that that Vietnam-era photograph "is always in front of me, even today."

But there's a lot more to this quietly-spoken left-wing politician than doom and gloom and his demeanour brightens markedly when he moves on to another, perhaps unlikely, passion - golf.

He's a self-proclaimed golf "fanatic" and believes politicians could learn a thing or two from the "sense of fair play" that is traditionally associated with the sport. This "fairness" has, he says, imbued his politics where he believes it can be an aid to finding the compromises necessary with his parliamentary political foes.

Eck, in fact, played the game, off a good handicap, for 13 years until "Big Bertha" - his nickname for the wood responsible for breaking two ribs in a wayward swing - put an end to his activities on the fairway. He still vividly recalls how he hit the ground, instead of the ball, in the accident.

Some wonder if our Ryder Cup demise in the States may be a sporting precursor to the future of the apparently crisis-ridden EU but, here, Eck is more optimistic and passionately believes in its sustainability.

He has a highly original way for describing the EU's current travails, likening these to a toddler's growing pains or, in German, "Kinderkrankheiten".

"The EU's current problems are like a small child having mumps or measles. It's something they have to endure but recover from in time," he says.

But, with the EU marking six decades since its creation next year - an age when most of us might be looking forward to retirement - isn't 60 a bit too old to be going through growing pains? "Not at all," comes Eck's immediate riposte. "For such a grand project 60 years is nothing. It is still growing and learning - as you do with age - how to be wise and mature."

He suggests, seriously, that it might be better to reserve judgement on whether the European Project has been an innovative success or abject failure until nearer its 200th anniversary.

But, even so, he agrees there have been failures and that the EU is in need of reform. Rapid enlargement to 28 member states is one mistake, he argues, adding that "expansion, especially, to Eastern Europe, was all done too quickly."

Of course, the 28 will soon become 27 and, on Brexit, he hopes the EU "is not too soft" in agreeing to British terms for exiting the bloc, warning that "others may then come up with the same idea."

At the same time, Eck wants the Brexit talks, due to kick in when the UK triggers Article 50, probably next March, to be civilised. "This is a two-sided coin. On the one hand, we cannot give the impression that you can enjoy the benefits of EU membership without also accepting the responsibilities but, on the other, the EU is in need of reform and I also want the Brexit negotiations to be done in a nice way."

Eck admits that, with the federalist MEP Guy Verhofstadt as part of the EU's Brexit team, this will be "difficult".

He was not impressed by Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's recent state of the union address - "I hoped he would come up with some new ideas but he didn't" - but still intends to stay positive. "Negativity about the EU's prospects will not help," he declares.

"We have to be very careful right now, because nationalism and populism are on the rise across Europe and I, as a German, am very aware of the risks of that."

Eck, who advocates member states taking in more, not fewer, refugees and asylum seekers, is particularly concerned about the rise of the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) party which recently defeated Angela Merkel in her own district in recent state elections.

"We must fight this nationalistic approach. The idea that nation states are better tackling the issues we face today on their own is wrong. For me, the EU has a bright future - I simply cannot see Europe without the EU."

If the EU can rely on Eck to champion its cause, so too can the cause of animal rights, the area he's best known for his in parliamentary work.

He's "particularly proud" to be cofounder of an MEP group set up to combat wildlife crime and welcomes as a "step in the right direction" the EU action plan, announced in February, to tackle wildlife trafficking, a criminal activity with a value of between €8bn-€29bn per year.

Eck is also a tireless campaigner on ending long distance live animal transport and has highlighted alleged animal rights abuses in China which, he says, has a particularly bad record in its treatment of rabbits. Several farms in China do not shear rabbits when extracting angora wool - the fell is plucked, causing extreme pain for the animals.

For Eck, it is impossible to differentiate between the way you treat both animals and humans. "How you treat animals has a lot to do with how you treat humans," he says. "If you have respect for animals, that will affect how you treat people."

Until 1997, Eck was a big meat eater - "I ate everything" - but that all changed when he read Peter Singer's 'Animal Liberation', in which the famous Princeton professor and author argues that humans have a duty of care towards animals. He says that after reading it, he "went straight to the fridge, took out all the meat and threw it in the garbage."

"I haven't eaten meat since," says Eck, who later met Singer and set up the 'Peter Singer Prize Association for Strategies to Reduce Animal Suffering', an organisation that annually awards a person who has contributed to the reduction of "human-related animal suffering."

Eck, who also turned vegan in 2000, says his renowned fervour for the welfare of everything from rabbits to bulls - he wants a ban on bullfighting - dates to his upbringing when his parents rammed home the importance of showing compassion for animals.

He's currently busy trying to push through an own-initiative report on 'minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits', arguing that the absence of any EU-wide legislation on this is "scandalous."

"Do you know," he asks, "that every year 330 million rabbits are bred and slaughtered for their meat and fur, often in the traditional battery cage system. A lot has been done about battery farm chickens, but rabbits are the forgotten species in EU legislation."

His parliamentary work also extends to campaigning for environmental protection and, on this, he says, "I was brought up to believe that you should leave the world as you would wish to enter it and, at the moment, we are not doing that, quite the opposite, in fact."

If he's fast making a name for himself for such work - he's a hero to those fighting the "slaughter" of dogs in Romania - Eck is still probably most easily recognisable for, yes, that beret.

So how does a German come to be such an avid user of a French fashion icon? "Years ago, I used to live in Thailand and played golf there. I haven't got much hair so when it was hot I got sunburnt on my head. I started wearing a beret and have worn one ever since. The only time I take it off is in bed."

His choice of head gear is also a clue to his revolutionary zeal and it's no coincidence that his office is adorned with imagery inspired by Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara, who was also fond of the beret.

When asked to pen a suitable wording for his own headstone, Eck pauses for the briefest of moments, then announces, "He tried to move peanuts in the right direction."

For a man who takes joy in fighting the apparently unmovable, that somehow seems perfectly appropriate.

About the author

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