British MEPs will soon bid a fond - or not-so-fond - farewell to Parliament. Some of them told Martin Banks what they will (and won’t) miss about Brussels and their possible plans for a post-Brexit future.

With 29 March - the day the UK is due to leave the EU - looming fast, British deputies are readying themselves for the future.

Some say they’ll look back on their time in Brussels and Strasbourg with affection; others cannot wait to “get back to Blighty.”

European Conservatives and Reformists Group deputy John Procter hopes to pursue new opportunities in the UK and use his knowledge of the EU institutions within Brussels.
“I joined the Parliament in 2016 after the referendum where the British people voted, by a majority, to leave the EU. I knew my time in Brussels and Strasbourg was limited from the start. Being an MEP has been fascinating. I have worked with some talented people both in the Parliament and with those who lobby.”

However, he says the institution's bureaucracy is a nightmare.

“I hope the EU institutions will come to their senses and have a single Parliament; I will not miss this element at all. I will miss the friendships and comradery of those I have met and worked with.”

His group and British Conservative Party colleague Amjad Bashir says he has been “proud” to represent the people of his Yorkshire and Humber constituency, but says, as a committed Brexiteer, he is looking forward to seeing an independent UK outside the EU.

“What will I do next? the honest answer is that I really don't know yet. Hopefully, something that can put to good use the skills I have learnt here” Dan Dalton

“After Brexit, I shall continue to serve Yorkshire and the Conservative Party in every way I can, particularly through taking our free-market, free-enterprise message to different cultures and communities.”

ECR Colleague Rupert Matthews, who arrived in Brussels in July 2017, has mixed feelings, saying, “I’m not sure that I would say that I have exactly ‘enjoyed’ my time as an MEP, but I have certainly found it to be most interesting. My colleagues were most supportive in helping me settle in and learn how the place works. My staff have also been very supportive, and have made my time here rather more pleasant than it might otherwise have been. However, I will be glad when it is all over and I return to Blighty.”

On leaving Parliament, Matthews will return to his former career as an historian. “I have written a number of books, on historical subjects as diverse as Alexander the Great’s Granicus Campaign, everyday life in medieval times and the role of soothsayers in Mayan society. I have also advised television and film production companies on historical accuracy and given a number of lectures on different historical subjects.”

Fellow Tory, John Flack, says, “I have devoted much of my time as an MEP to campaigning for animal welfare and that will continue after I leave. When you believe so much in a cause, you don’t forget it just because your elected mandate expires. So, I shall be working with Compassion in World Farming and the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, among others. I shall carry on making the case for
conservation, compassion and the fair treatment of all animals across the globe, whether that be professionally or in my personal life.”

END OF AN ERA

“What will I do next?”, asks another Conservative member, Dan Dalton, adding, “The honest answer is that I really don’t know yet. Hopefully, something that can put to good use the skills I have learnt here. Like many Brits, I am waiting to see what will happen with Brexit and the ongoing Article 50 discussions. It’s also a question of what my family would like to do and where they want to live."

“I used to be a cricket coach and I am really passionate about getting more young people involved in sport. So maybe I’ll do something along those lines in my spare time.”

Dalton says it has been an “honour” to represent his constituents as an MEP, “albeit it for only a short time. It’s been a wonderful experience, I’ve met some great people and I will be sad to go. I’ve worked in the parliament for 14 years in virtually every role: stagiaire; MEP assistant; group adviser and MEP, so it will really be the end of an era for me.”

“I had the unique honour of being the first Plaid Cymru MEP elected in 1999 - and was then re-elected in three subsequent elections. twenty years representing Wales in Europe have flown by. It has been hard work, but I feel I have achieved a lot” Jill Evans

Veteran Scottish Labour MEP David Martin, one of the UK’s longest-serving deputies, says, “After 35 years as an MEP, I will retire to Scotland. I was always planning to retire this year, but I’m devastated that the UK is leaving the EU.”

“During my 35 years, I have seen Europe contribute to improving worker and consumer rights in the UK; I’ve witnessed EU regional policy reinvigorate declining regions in Scotland and improve the environment. I only hope all this will not be lost.”

His Labour colleague, Rory Palmer, joined Parliament in October 2017 and - as things stand - will be the last UK MEP to join the Parliament.

He said, “People tend not to believe me when I say this, but the honest answer is that I haven’t yet spent a great deal of time thinking about what I might do next. I am exploring one or two options at the moment, but I am still very busy here in Brussels and across my region in the UK. I took my seat as an MEP six months after Theresa May triggered Article 50, so I’ve always known there was a clear time limit on my time in the Parliament. I’ve been determined to be the most effective MEP I can be in that time, and that’s what I intend to continue doing until the end of my mandate, whenever that may be."

"My days are still incredibly busy in the Parliament. I also have plans in the next couple of months for the Dying to Work campaign, which I am coordinating in Brussels. I will be pushing right until the 29 March for stronger commitments in legislation to protect those people in the workplace with a terminal illness; I’m developing plans to profile this campaign in the 2019 EU elections."

MEP DREAM, BREXIT NIGHTMARE

Becoming a MEP was “a dream come true” for Wajid Khan, another Labour member, who adds, “I used to be a taxi driver and I genuinely dreamt of coming to Brussels and serving my community on an international level. It’s a huge honour to be on the human rights sub-committee, where I am able
to speak out about human rights concerns around the world."

"I am proud to regularly use the platform of the European Parliament to speak about the issues that matter to people in my constituency, such as fracking," he added.

“My biggest battles have often been to overcome the denigration of the EU in our press back home, and how that has not been challenged by weak politicians over the years. We have really paid a price for that” Claude Moraes

“While becoming a MEP was a dream, Brexit has been an absolute nightmare. All forms of Brexit will make the UK poorer and weaker. The country has been divided by a sham referendum that featured illegal overspending, foreign interference and lies. I am also personally disappointed, but I can serve my community in other ways. I have two young kids so it will be great to be able to spend a bit more time with them. I don’t know what the future holds, but I’m looking forward to continuing to serve the people of Burnley.”

Labour MEP John Howarth said he has “no idea” what he will be doing “if and when” his mandate comes to an end, adding, “I’ve been far too busy. Assuming the UK goes ahead and leaves the EU, I would hope to contribute in some way to the future relationship.”

“It has been a massive privilege to do this job and I have enjoyed it, and life in Brussels, immensely. I will be fine whatever happens, but there are millions for whom Brexit means the destruction of their dreams and a blight on their lives. It is a monumental mistake.”

S&D group colleague deputy Claude Moraes, chair of the civil liberties committee, said he “was privileged” to have served on one of Parliament’s most prolific legislative committees. “Doing that, and being British, taught me that there has been great acceptance among staff and MEPs if you work hard and care about the work. Even in the final days before Brexit I was accepted as chair and supported.”

“I didn’t think it would be like that - particularly as I work on some of the Parliament’s more sensitive issues; rule of law, migration, security, electoral interference. My biggest battles have often been to overcome the denigration of the EU in our press back home and how that has not been challenged by weak politicians over the years. We have really paid a price for that.”

“On a practical level, it’s led to people not knowing what we do. Weirdly, the Brexit debate threw a spotlight on some of the positive things we do, but it has been a mountain to climb.”

He adds, “I can honestly say it has been a privilege to work in the European Parliament and represent such a great city as London. I can’t believe we’re leaving - but in all honesty, Eurosceptics were already driving us in this direction with a blanket anti-EU press in the UK at their disposal.”

“I’ve witnessed EU regional policy reinvigorate declining regions in Scotland and improve the environment. I hope all this will not be lost” David Martin

Greens/EFA group MEP Jill Evans says, “I had the unique honour of being the first Plaid Cymru MEP elected in 1999 - and was then re-elected in three subsequent elections. Twenty years representing Wales in Europe have flown by. It has been hard work, but I feel I have achieved a lot.”
"As a small, modern, bilingual nation, Wales belongs in the EU. I still want to see Wales take its place as an independent member state."

Evans says she has so far made no plans in the event of the UK leaving. “My job is to work in the best interests of my constituents in Wales and that means remaining in the EU. That is my main focus and I will not stop working for that.”

'DELIGHTED TO LEAVE'

Unsurprisingly, UKIP/EFDD group’s Ray Finch is happy to leave, adding, “I have nothing set in stone. My previous career was in telecoms and my skillset is now out of date. I am exploring the possibility of setting up a housing charity. When I was my party’s housing spokesman, I was staggered by the housing situation for ordinary people in the UK. I feel this is the biggest domestic challenge we face.”

He adds, “I will be delighted to leave. My only aim, and the reasons I gave up my previous career, was to play a small part in enabling the secession of the UK from a project that is becoming a corporatist empire with no control by, or concern for, ordinary people."

"The system within the Parliament is simply a rubber stamping of decisions made elsewhere. Consequently, the EU is not simply undemocratic, it is anti-democratic."

Finch says he has met “many competent and kindly staff here who work very hard to make the place work and I would like to thank them very much. However, the hatred I have perceived from politicians who feel that any contrary opinion should not be tolerated has strengthened my belief that - to paraphrase George Orwell - “Europe is a family with the wrong members in control”.

“For an institution whose motto is ‘united in diversity’, the Parliament is an elitist body stuffed with middle-class white people” Ray Finch

Finch adds, “For an institution whose motto is ‘united in diversity’, the Parliament is an elitist body stuffed with middle-class white people that disdain the people and comprise a management class whose world is bounded by these walls. I suspect most of them will be as glad to see the back of me as I will of them."

There is, though, one thing he will miss, Strasbourg cathedral, which he calls “one of the wonders of the world” adding, “I would urge anybody who has not visited it to do so. It truly shows the potential greatness of humankind."

After Britain’s tortuous and still-unresolved exit from the EU, many - irrespective of their political colours - would probably say “Amen to all that”.

About the author

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