

Carry On Regardless: The Brexit Party hits Brussels

Written by Lorna Hutchinson and Jonathan Benton on 29 July 2019 in Opinion
Opinion

The Brexit Party are political prisoners in Brussels. Or so they'd have you believe. Despite standing in the European elections, knowing full well what awaited them, Nigel Farage and his band of Brexit-peddling cronies have been on a mission to expose to their faithful followers back home in Blighty that "Brussels" is the most dreadful of places: a wasteful, bureaucratic hellhole where little is achieved and where MEPs' pockets bulge with excessive pay and unwarranted expenses.



Brexit Party MEPs | Photo credit: Press Association

With the kind of swagger usually reserved for the truly competent, the Brexit Party's deputies have embarked on an impressive gaffe spree since arriving at the European Parliament.

Despite orchestrating a number of jaw-dropping stunts in the weeks since their arrival, arguably the most mortifying was the party turning their collective backs on the European anthem - Beethoven's 'Ode To Joy' - at the European Parliament's ceremony to mark the opening plenary following the elections.

Clearly having thought that thumbing their noses at the House and its solemn traditions would garner awestruck reactions from their peers, the general feeling among deputies was revulsion at the childish prank.

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Labour's leader in the European Parliament, veteran MEP Richard Corbett, branded the move "pathetic", while Liberal Democrat MEP Chris Davies, said, "To turn your back on this is more than rude; it is insulting to fellow human beings. The Brexit Party make me feel ashamed to be British."

Ska Keller, co-leader of the Greens/EFA group in Parliament, meanwhile branded Team Farage "a total disgrace."

"These people stood for election to Parliament and to represent their citizens. And yet the first thing they do is to totally disrespect the values of this Parliament and all it stands for."

Of the Brexit Party's 29 MEPs, Annunziata Rees-Mogg, sister of arch Brexiteer Jacob, has been more than vocal about her disdain for the European Union and its institutions.

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Writing for the Daily Express - a beacon of populist rhetoric - she told readers before taking up her seat in Brussels that she was preparing to attend "a Parliament with little democratic legitimacy."

"I confess to being intrigued, we have all read and heard about the deals done in dark corners, horse trading in the corridors of power, decisions over sumptuous meals at European taxpayers' expense," Rees-Mogg wrote, adding, "I go to leave. I go to fight tooth and nail for the democracy of our great nation to be enacted. I go to get us out: cleanly, swiftly and smoothly."

Unfortunately for Annunziata - or "@Zatzi" on Twitter - her transition to the "corridors of power" has been neither swift nor smooth.

First, she bemoaned the fact that she had been issued a "shiny new iPad" by the European Parliament "for no very obvious reason."

Having been promptly schooled by the Twitterati on the purpose of the iPad - to help her fulfil her MEP duties - she retorted, "If you honestly believe anyone on a salary of €101k, plus office allowance of

€52k each year, on top of three offices and €250k staff salaries NEEDS a free iPad, I'm not sure you ever meet normal people."

This, from a woman who is a fully paid-up, card-carrying member of the moneyed elite.

Rees-Mogg's latest tale of woe from the "undemocratic talking shop" of the European Parliament arose from her confusion over the speed of electronic voting.

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"Before today's EP votes, various people had warned me what it would be like. I assumed they exaggerated. They didn't. Seconds to vote on subjects from Hong Kong to Venezuela. What a system, no time to breathe, let alone think, between each issue."

MEPs shot back with suggestions that she "do her homework" before showing up.

Greens MEP Molly Scott Cato gave Rees-Mogg a timely lesson in Parliament procedures, replying, "Because in the European Parliament all amendments are taken rather than secret committees of whips stitching things up, there isn't time to take a leisurely stroll through the lobby," adding, "It also helps if you spend your staffing budget on expert advisors to guide you through the process."

Fellow Green Catherine Rowett agreed, saying, "Some of us attended the debates and also reflected in our groups on whether to accept the various amendments. I wonder whether you have had advice from experts on which resolutions were acceptable? I noticed you were not there during the debate on the urgencies."

Liberal Democrat MEP Caroline Voaden chipped in: "The idea is you debate the issues in your group and groups debate with each other. Your group comes up with a position on how to vote. You then go and vote. If you don't have a group that makes it tricky... and of course you wouldn't want 'expert' staff to help you."

The issue of presence at parliamentary debates, or lack thereof, has dogged the Brexit Party pretty much since day one.

On 3 July, newly-elected Liberal Democrat MEP Luisa Porritt posted a photo on Twitter showing empty rows of seats where the derrieres of Brexit Party MEPs should have been parked.

"The photo, which appeared to show the Brexit party MEPs as the only deputies participating in a parliamentary debate, was actually taken during a break in proceedings"

"Took this photo this morning. Second sitting day and Brexit Party MEPs are already not showing up for votes. Their seats haven't been full for most of the day, despite important voting to determine EU top jobs. Being paid to not work? Have to ask... what do they do all day?"

Presumably in an effort to do some damage control, on July 16, a group of Brexit Party MEPs appeared in a photo shared in a tweet by British far-right and pro-Brexit outlet Guido Fawkes' European account

'Euro Guido'.

The photo, which appeared to show the Brexit party MEPs as the only deputies participating in a parliamentary debate, was actually taken during a break in proceedings, as evidenced by the fact that one of the MEPs is wearing a watch showing the exact time the photo was taken.

It was a little after 4pm, which, according to the agenda, was during a break following the Review of the Romanian presidency.

Twitter was reliably scathing, with one user tweeting: "You can't even organise a decent propaganda stunt ... should've covered the wristwatch."

Ironically, while the Brexit party was in the chamber demonstrating their 'dedication' to the cause, Parliament's political groups were getting together to decide if they would choose to back Commission President-designate Ursula von der Leyen later that evening.

While Brexit Party MEPs are never slow off the mark in lambasting peers over their expenses, the party figurehead found himself at the centre of his own expenses scandal.

In early June, Farage - an MEP since 1999 - rejected a European Parliament request to appear before a committee to testify on allegations that he had failed to disclose gifts worth over €400,000 from a UK businessman.

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It has been claimed that items paid for by him by Leave campaigner Arron Banks included Farage's London home, his car and trips to the US to meet Donald Trump.

For his part, Farage issued a statement branding Parliament's advisory committee on the code of conduct a "kangaroo court."

Undoubtedly, however, the Brexit party's theatrics reached their nadir during Ann Widdecombe's maiden speech in Parliament, where the affront factor was set to 11 as she compared the UK's exit from the EU to the emancipation of slaves.

Widdecombe, a veteran UK politician, known most recently for her stints on the celebrity TV voyeur-fests "Celebrity Big Brother" and "Strictly Come Dancing", took the floor in the manner of a deranged grandmother after one too many sherries and proceeded to cause maximum offence while retaining an air of righteous indignation.

"There is a pattern consistent throughout history of oppressed people turning on their oppressors, slaves against their owners, the peasantry against the feudal barons, colonies against empires, and that is why Britain is leaving ... It doesn't matter which language you use, we are leaving and we are pleased to be going. Nous allons [sic], wir gehen, we are off!"

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Guy Verhofstadt, coordinator and chair of Parliament's Brexit Steering Committee, wryly noted that "Nigel Farage is facing some stiff competition as chief clown of the Brexit Party in the European Parliament."

But you can't keep a good man down. During the parliamentary debate ahead of the vote on Ursula von der Leyen's nomination to become Commission President, Farage rose like a phoenix from the ashes and delivered some truly memorable clangers.

"I may be speaking from the back of the chamber today, but as I predicted in the European elections, the Brexit Party were very much to the front ... and were massive, massive winners."

"I come back to a place that has been humbled and humiliated. The European Council stitch-up has rendered this place impotent, until today, when you have got some real power if you choose to use it."

For her part, von der Leyen looked predictably underwhelmed. She spoke for many when she delivered the coup de grâce: "I think, Mr Farage, we can probably do without what you have got to say here."

Couldn't have put it better myself, Mrs President.

About the author

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