

Great expectations

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Interviews

Fresh from their victories in this year's European elections, five of Parliament's newest deputies from across the political spectrum sat down with Lorna Hutchinson, discussing the path that brought them to Brussels and what they hope the next five years have in store



Back row, left to right: Assita Kanko (BE, ECR), Isabel Benjumea (ES, EPP), Pierfrancesco Majorino (IT, S&D); front row, left to right: Karen Melchior (DK, RE), Erik Marquardt (DE, Greens/EFA) | *Photo credit: Giancarlo Rocconi*

Already looking very much at home in the European Parliament, five newly-elected MEPs have high hopes for what they will achieve during their tenure.

With enthusiasm and unwavering determination, each has a clear set of goals in mind, while keenly aware that their time as deputies has an expiration date.

Despite coming from different groups and ideologies spanning the political divide, they have one thing in common – they're all rookies. But not for long.

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Parliament's notorious "baptism of fire" initiation for new MEPs will soon ensure that they are old hands in no time.

Speaking about their initial impressions of Parliament, the overriding feeling is one of awe, and all five speak of how grateful and honoured they are to be in this position.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Karen Melchior, a Danish MEP from Renew Europe, describes her early days in Parliament as "overwhelming, but in the best possible way."

"There is so much to do, and I am thrilled that I get to work here. The amount of interesting people to meet and collaborate with here in Brussels has made my calendar a nightmare."

Just like everybody else, I want more hours in a day, but as that's not possible, I'll work to get five more years."

Erik Marquardt, a Greens deputy from Germany, says that his very first impression was "I have to deal with a huge building complex that feels like a labyrinth," adding that he has now "settled in quite well."

Marquardt goes on to say that in general he is very impressed by how people from 28 countries, speaking many different languages, come together to work for a stronger and more united Europe, making the lives of hundreds of millions of Europeans better and easier.

"The current situation, in which thousands of people are dying and NGOs are being criminalised, is completely unacceptable" **Erik Marquardt, Greens/EFA**

Meanwhile, Belgian ECR MEP Assita Kanko speaks of how happy and impressed she was to arrive at the Parliament as an elected member.

"It made me realise that I was elected and that I would work in this Parliament, it was so amazing. Of course, I got lost in the building, but I guess most people do in the first days. It is exciting and I love it."

Pierfrancesco Majorino, an Italian S&D member, says that at the same time as relishing the opportunity to bring his contribution to Brussels, he was equally struck by the scale and complexity of the problems facing Europe and the challenges that need to be overcome.

"I ran for the European Parliament because I wanted – and still want – to deliver a fairer Europe, one which helps disadvantaged people and supports future generations.

EPP Spanish deputy Isabel Benjumea said that her first impression was more of a concern – about the gulf between Parliament and European citizens.

"I'm talking from a Spanish perspective, because this is what I'm most aware of. Clearly, there is a gap between citizens and their political representatives, and I view that with concern."

CORE ISSUES

Asked why they became MEPs in the first place and the issues they will be focusing on during this mandate, all five are equally passionate about the causes closest to their hearts.

Melchior says, "It may be a cliché, but it's also the truth; I am a European and I want to work for the future of all Europeans and not just Danes.

I want a free and open society for all European citizens, with the right to free movement. In these times, when our values of freedom, diversity and openness are under threat, we need to renew Europe."

She has set her sights on securing an open and free internet for a free society. "Technology profoundly affects our daily life and societies, but legislation is not keeping up.

Europe is not quite fit for the digital era. We must be more innovative and globally competitive if we are to integrate our European rights and values into the development of future technology.

We must also ensure that the voices of consumers and citizens are listened to as much as those of the tech giants."

"Women should finally get equal opportunities and rights – we're tired of waiting.
Mediocre men will have to step up or step aside" **Karen Melchior, Renew Europe**

Melchior adds that a free and open society should be for all, "regardless of who they are or who they love. A Europe truly united in diversity, based on equality."

Burkina Faso-born Kanko says, "I was born to look down and obey, because I am a girl. But on election day 85,950 people gave me their vote because they want me to be listened to, to make their voice heard in Parliament.

I am still deeply moved and happy to be here, and I will work hard. For me, being here is a statement; I went through a lot, but I always believed in education and the emancipation of women.

I am going to use my position here to work hard to help advance and inspire women." She says that in addition to fighting for women's rights, her place on the LIBE Committee will help her contribute to combatting terrorism, human trafficking and cyber criminality.

"Human rights, gender equality, security and defence and international cooperation are truly my passions. This is why I'm here. To reduce the distance between Europe and the average citizen. People need to reconnect."

Marquardt says that, as a member of the Green Party Council in Germany, he spent a lot of time working on migration and asylum.

"The political project I'm standing up for is one that advocates for individual liberty, responsibility, solidarity – the classic liberal project. Europe needs voices defending those ideas, today more than ever" **Isabel Benjumea, EPP**

"As we can clearly see, these topics cannot be solved by nation states alone. Leaving countries like Italy, Greece or Malta to their own devices on this issue cannot be an option for a united Europe."

As these issues are European challenges, he says the onus is on the EU to find European solutions consistent with the human rights of refugees.

"I think the European Parliament is the right place to work on these solutions," he adds. As for Majorino, he wants to focus his attention on the steps Europe needs to take in the social sphere, "steps that I consider particularly urgent".

He adds, "The fight against poverty, establishing a minimum wage, introducing childhood and housing policies and putting in place a more responsible management of migration. These are some initial examples."

Benjumea, meanwhile, became an MEP to defend ideas, principles and values. "That's what I've done all my life as part of civil society. I've been a businesswoman, and I became a politician not so long ago, in December last year, in fact. I've always understood that in politics you have to take part to stand up for a political project."

"The political project I'm standing up for is one that advocates for individual liberty, responsibility, solidarity – the classic liberal project. Europe needs voices defending those ideas, today more than ever."

DID YOU KNOW...

So, what facts might people find surprising about our five new MEPs? Well, Erik Marquardt was once a tennis instructor. "If anybody in the Parliament is up for a tennis match, just let me know," he says.

Assita Kanko says that she is very shy, but that no one ever notices "because I don't appear shy." As for Melchior, her great grandfather was the Danish composer Niels W Gade.

"He was chief conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig but had to return to Copenhagen when war broke out between Prussia and Denmark in 1848."

Benjumea tell us that she is passionate about hunting, bullfighting and wine, adding, "I've got a little vineyard, so if you ever have trouble finding me, I will be there, in Extremadura."

"I was born to look down and obey because I am a girl. But on election day 85,950 people gave me their vote because they want me to be listened to, to make their voice heard in Parliament" **Assita Kanko, ECR**

As a bonus, she says that she has a very big family and has 69 first cousins. "For me, family is

essential, they've always been a support. The feeling of having such a big circle of people around you, for the good and the bad things, is an absolute luxury."

As for Majorino, he has been in left-wing Italian politics since the age of 14. "For eight years I was a member of the administration of the Municipality of Milan, dealing with social affairs."

"I dealt mainly with the fight against poverty, civil rights, the reception of migrants, policies for people with disabilities and for the most disadvantaged." In his spare time, he loves to write, including novels.

FUTURE HOPES

Looking forward, the deputies each have hopes and expectations for the new European Commission, which from November onwards will have its first female President, Ursula von der Leyen, along with a new College of Commissioners.

Majorino says he expects to see changes. "We have to change Europe or Europe will not make it."

Isabel Benjumea says she expects the new Commission to understand the delicate situation the European Union is currently facing.

"Brexit is a challenge that is going to test the European project," she says, adding that security, immigration and terrorism also present substantial challenges.

Marquardt, for his part, says he hopes that von der Leyen keeps the promises she made before she was elected. "She said that gender equality is a cornerstone of her presidency, so I expect parity between women and men in the Commission."

"She also promised new approaches for a common European asylum system and rescue in the Mediterranean Sea."

"I ran for the European Parliament because I wanted - and still want - to deliver a fairer Europe, one which helps disadvantaged people and supports future generations"

Pierfrancesco Majorino, S&D

"The current situation, in which thousands of people are dying and NGOs are being criminalised, is completely unacceptable," he says, adding, "I also expect von der Leyen and the Commission to take action against the climate crisis and social inequality."

Kanko echoes the hopes that Ursula von der Leyen will push for women's rights, as does Melchior, who says, "Women should finally get equal opportunities and rights - we're tired of waiting. Mediocre men will have to step up or step aside."

She also hopes that the Commission will act to stop global warming, including creating infrastructure for alternatives to air travel.

Moreover, she wants to see "modern legislation corresponding to our modern and innovative Europe." "But - just like Elvis Presley - I want a little less legislation, a little more action!"

About the author

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