

A Vote for Race Equality in Europe

On 10 June 2004 elections for the European Parliament will be held in the UK. Voters will elect 78 UK Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), shaping the composition of the European Union's co-legislative body. The outcome of these elections is significant for the future of race equality in Europe.

The European Parliament has been proactive in initiating and strengthening anti-racist policies in the EU. However, the growing influence of the Far Right across Europe threatens to transform it into a forum for populist and racist parties. Britain's own Far Right party is preparing for a big push to send MEPs to Europe, their campaign boosted by racist parties in other countries, such as Le Pen's National Front.

But voters can choose from a range of prospective MEPs fielded by mainstream parties, including several black and minority ethnic candidates, many of whom have a solid record of promoting race equality and representing the concerns of Europe's diverse communities. Each vote cast on 10 June will make a difference to race equality in Europe.

What are the European elections?

Elections to the European Parliament take place every five years throughout the European Union. Only 24% of the UK electorate voted in the 1999 elections. Under the system of proportional representation, a low voter turnout usually benefits small parties, as

1999 EU election results

Conservatives: 36
Labour: 29
Liberal Democrats: 10
UK Independence Party: 3
Green Party: 2
Paid Cymru: 2
Scottish National Party: 2
SDLP: 1
Ulster Unionists: 1
DUP: 1

fewer votes in total make it easier for them to obtain a higher share of the vote. This year, a low turnout could lead to the BNP gaining seats in the European Parliament even if they only get a relatively small number of votes. As some local government elections are being held on the same day, the BNP will be looking to repeat its success in the last local elections, when they averaged 17% of the vote in the seats they contested.

How does proportional representation work?

The UK uses a proportional representation system for elections to the European Parliament, with twelve regional lists of candidates (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and nine English regions). Seats are allocated to parties according to their share of the total vote in a constituency. This means that each party gets a number of MEPs roughly proportional to the votes they receive, enabling smaller parties to send an MEP even if they only come third or fourth in a region.

How does the European Parliament work?

The European Parliament consists of 732 MEPs representing 455 million people from 25 member states. It is the EU's democratically elected body, which is responsible for approving and adopting EU legislation and budgets in co-operation with the European Commission and the European Council. Through their elected parliamentarians, Europe's citizens can influence EU laws and policies and hold the European Commission to account for its actions and spending.

The powers of the European Parliament have increased notably over recent years, with MEPs now more closely involved in the EU's legislative decision-making process. In many areas where the Parliament was previously only consulted by the European Commission and the Council, it has become a partner in decision-making. Whether this will also apply to initiatives in the area of anti-discrimination and equality depends on the outcome of the negotiations on the EU Constitution, which will specify the Parliament's powers.

What does your MEP do?

As representatives of the most democratic component of the European decision-making process, Members of the European Parliament are there to voice the concerns of people living in the regions that elected them. They do this by listening to local residents and groups in their region, pushing for appropriate action in the Parliament and making the European Commission, Council and other EU bodies aware of what their UK constituents really want.

Your vote on 10 June can make a difference:

- **Advance the EU race equality agenda**
- **Strengthen the voice of black and minority ethnic people in Europe**
- **Prevent the election of a racist MEP**

The European Parliament's record on race equality: some examples

■ Legislative amendments by Parliament can strengthen legal provisions. In the consultation procedure for the **Race Equality Directive**, the Parliament's Committee on Citizens' Freedoms and Rights made housing an explicit area of protection to be covered by the Directive. However, other amendments were not accepted; such as the proposal to include the ground of religion or belief in the Race Equality Directive. (Report ref A5-0136/2000 accessible via www.europarl.eu.int/activities/default_en.htm)

■ In 2002 Parliament reviewed the proposal for a **Council Framework Decision** to combat racism and xenophobia through criminal law provisions. Amendments included a requirement for comprehensive reports on racist incidents, police actions, prosecutions and convictions to be supplied to the EUMC for monitoring purposes, including details on the ethnicity of perpetrators and victims. The Framework Decision has yet to be adopted by the Council, though progress under the upcoming Dutch EU Presidency may be possible. (Ref A5-0189/2002)

■ In May 03 Claude Moraes MEP asked the Council to respond to the rise in **racism by football fans** and organised racist behaviour at matches in some Central and Eastern European countries. The Council said it strongly condemns all racist incidents. (Ref E-1557/03)

■ In March 01 Theresa Villiers MEP asked the Commission about **ethnic minority representation among staff** in EU institutions, as well as participation of ethnic minorities in the election of MEPs. Neil Kinnock, Commission Vice President, replied that no ethnic monitoring was carried out, but that reforms intended to "give greater profile to the recruitment of members of ethnic minorities". (Ref: E-0595/01)

Race equality in the EU

Over the past decade, the European Parliament has assumed a key role in promoting race equality in Europe. In 1995 it adopted a resolution calling for new provisions in the Treaty of the European Community that would give the EU an explicit competence to combat racism and take concrete action. A firm legal basis was needed to outlaw racial discrimination across Europe. In 1997, the European Year Against Racism, the Parliament helped to establish the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC).

Europe now benefits from binding laws against racial discrimination, which all member states must implement and enforce. These were brought in under Article 13, a new anti-discrimination clause in the EC Treaty of 1998, based on proposals by the European Parliament and the Commission. The EU Race Equality Directive was adopted in 2000 and came into force on 19 July 2003. It outlaws all forms of racial discrimination in employment, education, health, social benefits and the provision of goods and services, including housing. Religious discrimination in employment is also prohibited, under the Employment Equality Directive, in force since 2 December 2003.

The EU anti-discrimination agenda is continuously evolving, with a consultation on new initiatives expected soon. The European Parliament needs to be in a position to drive this agenda progressively, advancing higher and more coherent equality standards. It can also

play a vital role in maintaining and sharpening the focus on anti-racism in the process of transforming the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia into a human rights agency. Legislative proposals will be submitted to Parliament next year, following a consultation exercise this summer. To ensure that anti-racism remains at the forefront of EU initiatives, Europe depends on a Parliament comprised of strong advocates for race equality.

Black and minority ethnic MEPs

Despite its record of pushing for EU action against racism, the European Parliament itself does not yet reflect Europe's diverse black and minority ethnic population. The UK currently has four black and minority ethnic MEPs (4.6% of all UK MEPs): Nirij Deva, Neena Gill, Bashir Khanbhai and Claude Moraes. To ensure that MEPs are reflective of our diverse communities, this figure would have to double and also include representatives from African and Black Caribbean groups. While some parties' lists contain several black and minority ethnic candidates, most are not in winnable seats and their inclusion is not systematically monitored or promoted.

More pressure needs to be put on all parties to strengthen their efforts to increase black and minority ethnic representation in EU politics.

BME candidates

Labour: 10 (12%)

Liberal Dem: 9 (10.3%)

Conservatives: 5 (6.7%)

Green Party: 1 (1.3%)

Further Information

European Parliament: www.europarl.eu.int

▶ Committee on Citizens' Freedoms & Rights, Justice & Home Affairs: www.europarl.eu.int/committees/libe_home.htm

▶ To obtain general information from Europe Direct: www.europa.eu.int/citizens or freephone 00 800 67891011

▶ To identify and contact your regional MEPs: www.europarl.org.uk/uk_meps/MembersMain.htm

▶ To submit a petition to the European Parliament: www.europarl.eu.int/petition/petition_en.htm

European Elections website (by the UK Office of the European Parliament): www.europecounts.org.uk

UK Office of the European Parliament: Tel 020 7227 4300, www.europarl.org.uk

Institute for Citizenship campaign on European elections: www.citizen.org.uk/getthevoteout.html

Unite against Fascism campaign: www.uaf.org.uk

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