

## Political books

# Redefining the role of the European Parliament

Two new books analyse the EU's flawed governance structure and propose radical solutions



The European Parliament in Brussels © Reuters

Alex Barker MAY 21, 2019

---

Many parliaments have had to wrest democratic power from nasty unelected rulers. The European Parliament, which holds [elections](#) this week, has a different story. This continent-wide experiment in democracy was conceived by elected national leaders, but they were sometimes just as beastly to it as autocrats.

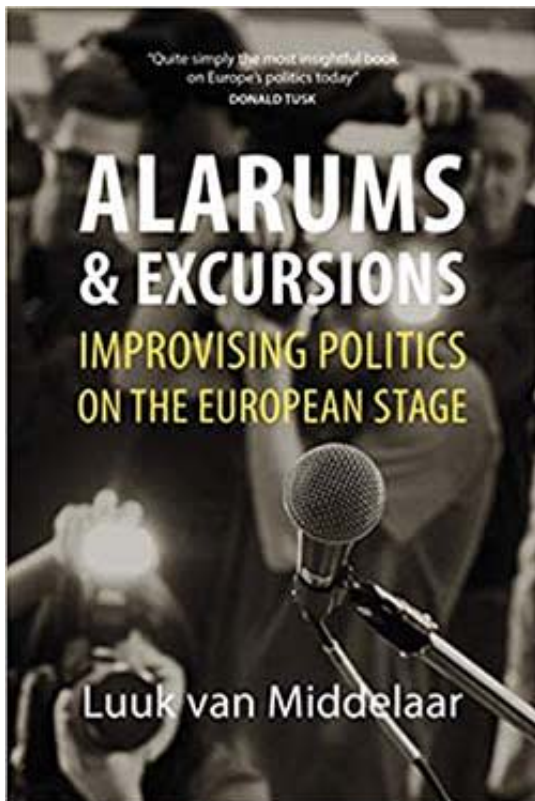
Every step of its 60-year evolution has been a wrench. It was not given a single seat, but scattered across three: Strasbourg, Brussels and Luxembourg. For much of its existence, parliamentarians had long commutes, but no power to make law. Only after pan-European elections were announced in the 1970s was there a rush to create pan-European parties — something of an oversight.

There is little doubt this weekend's elections will be an important moment, a political resilience [test](#) for the European project. The parliament has grown in stature and is bearing the brunt of an insurrectionist mood among some voters. But as two new books argue, it is still fighting for its role, especially when crisis strikes. The deeper question the books raise is: was the European Parliament given a flawed mission?

Blighted by impotence, the early parliament developed a reputation as a strange cauldron of obscure languages and political cultures, a place for has-beens and also-rans, federalist dreamers and swivel-eyed extremists. John Hume, a former MEP and father of the Northern Ireland peace process, once joked that some Strasbourg colleagues appeared “wired up to the moon”. One of its first big political triumphs in the 1980s was saving seals from being clubbed by Canadians.

The mockery and derision has certainly died down today. National governments (and even some anti-EU populists) are more likely to complain that Strasbourg has too much power, more than EU leaders ever imagined they had granted it. Within specific fields of EU life — single market rulemaking, tech and data policy, even big EU appointments — the 751 MEPs have shown they can wield real clout.

The creeping influence is a tribute to two standout strengths of this parliament: tenacity and rat-like cunning. The spirit was captured by [Klaus Welle](#), the parliament’s secretary-general: “Our motto could be: ‘We have no chance but we use it’.”



As Luuk Van Middelaar notes in his refreshing and perceptive book *Alarums & Excursions*, even establishing a name needed 30 years of bloody-mindedness. The original Common Assembly, inaugurated in 1958, quickly declared itself to be the European Parliament. But it had to wait until 1987 for that name to be officially recognised.

This stand-off was about more than just a name. For Van Middelaar it is one small illustration of the perpetual institutional battle to create and define a performance space for EU politics — what he depicts as its public theatre on a continent-wide stage.

The early parliament was powerless because the European project began as a backstage enterprise, where technocrats stitched Europe together one regulation at a time. The aim was to “smother political passions with a web of rules”. Parliament was not an afterthought, it represented politicisation to be actively avoided.

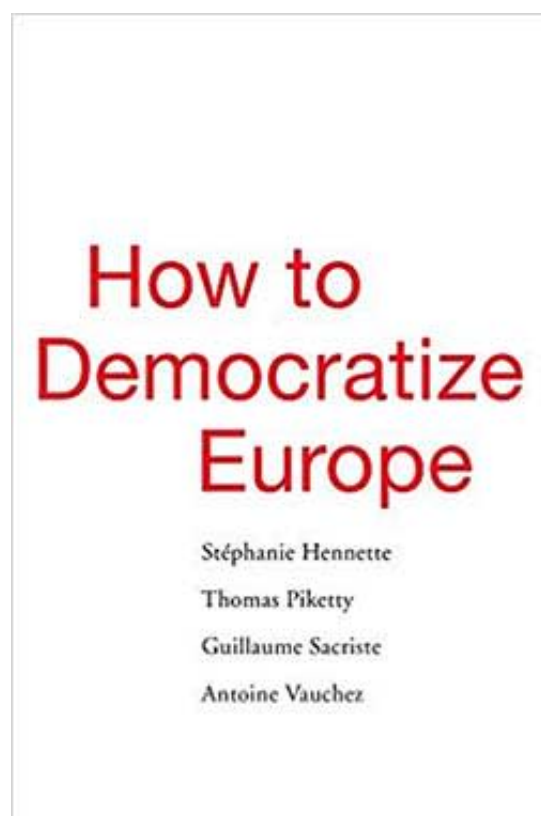
Van Middelaar’s contention is that this approach was never equipped to handle the politics of unforeseen events — moments of crisis where rules are obsolete or counterproductive, where threats required action, improvisation and leadership. The book’s title comes from an Elizabethan stage direction priming actors for onstage skirmishes or summoning noise, the rumble of battle and clash of arms. EU politics has had plenty of that of late.

Federalists hoped parliament provided one stage for this European political awakening. The

pioneers thought the move to direct elections in 1979 would “administer a salutary shock to the people”, creating a true democratic forum for European citizens. Arousing that pan-European political spirit proved a little harder than expected. It is a “democratic deficit” the true believers ascribed to one overriding problem: the system was not federalist enough.

But in Van Middelaar’s account the unforeseen events hit Europe thick and fast after 2009 — the crises of the eurozone, Ukraine, Brexit and migration — largely played out elsewhere: the forum national leaders, the world of summitry.

On an institutional level, that evolved in parallel to the parliament. When federalist Germans secured direct elections to parliament, the compromise to placate the French was the creation of the European Council. It drew its authority not directly from EU citizens, but from the national voters who elected heads of state and government. And to Van Middelaar, this was rightly the democratic theatre for the existential events, rather than a parliament orientated to the rules-driven politics of Brussels.



Van Middelaar is a more thoughtful guide than most to these institutions and events, in part because he brings the eye of a political theorist to his years working for the European Council president. It is scholar-cum-official blend of insights more common in Washington than Brussels. For the most part successfully, the text can dance from Machiavelli and Hegel into accounts of how EU leaders lived on the edge and “Europe lost its geopolitical innocence”.

Flourishes of political theory and attempts to liken intergovernmental treaties to “flying buttresses” in gothic architecture may be too much for some. Like some Washington insider accounts, it also betrays the seat from which Van Middelaar watched events. He rightly notes that the creation of the banking union, for instance, was one of

the most important acts of integration, but it appears to emerge from the summit ether. That underplays the crucial role of central bankers and other technocrats who introduced the ideas.

Lack of attention to technocratic government is certainly not a shortcoming of *How to Democratize Europe*, a dizzying jumble of a book whose lead authors hail from left-leaning French academia, including economist [Thomas Piketty](#).

At its core is an argument with merit: that the euro area “evolved in a blind spot of political controls, in a sort of democratic black hole”. It depicts a secretive apparatus of economic oppression unleashed on bailout countries, accountable to neither national politicians nor the European Parliament.

The authors promise to avoid “the technocratic ruts into which it has too often fallen”. But they promptly leap into a bewilderingly detailed account of the eurozone’s committee plumbing, all written with a dark conspiratorial edge. Elected national leaders who improvised their way through the eurozone crisis — ultimately putting politics over economics — barely get a look in.

The antidote proposed is a completely new parliamentary assembly for the eurozone, empowered to set a common minimum corporate tax rate and mutualise public debt above 60 per cent of gross national product.

The book is principally a blast against austerity economics, with institutional reforms (including a full draft treaty) engineered to overturn it. As few as 10 countries can bring the treaty into force (and presumably mutualise debt) even if Germany rejects it. That will strike some as a spectacularly effective way to destroy the eurozone by political means.

More interesting is the back-to-the-future design of the assembly, which is composed of national MPs on secondment — the basis on which the European Parliament worked before 1979. The aim is to avoid national parliaments becoming hollowed out playgrounds for populists, with MPs idle because real power moved to EU level. One wonders what shape populism and the democratic role of the European Parliament would have taken had its old model prevailed, albeit with some actual power.

**Alarums & Excursions: Improvising Politics on the European Stage**, by Luuk van Middelaar, translated by Liz Waters, *Agenda Publishing*, RRP\$35, 320 pages

**How To Democratize Europe**, by Stéphanie Hennette, Thomas Piketty, Guillaume Sacriste, Antoine Vauchez, translated by Paul Dermin, Marc LePain and Patrick Camiller, *Harvard University Press*, RRP£17.99, 224 pages

*Alex Barker is the FT’s Brussels bureau chief*

*Join our online book group on Facebook at [FTBooksCafe](#). Subscribe to [FT Life](#) on YouTube for the latest FT Weekend videos*

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2019.  
All rights reserved.