The European Parliament’s Ushers

Dignified and elegant in their black tails, with dress shirts embellished with white bow ties and sporting silver-plated chains, the European Parliament’s ushers are hard to miss. Find out more about who they are and what they do.

Everyone agrees – without ushers the European Parliament could not function effectively. Every day, they deliver thousands of letters and documents to offices and to the meetings held by the Political Groups and Parliamentary Committees. But that is only part of their job. They are also among the first people encountered by new MEPs when they take up their seats. So, wearing their black tails and white gloves, they recently formed a guard of honour to welcome Bulgarian and Romanian observers who were beginning their term of office in Strasbourg. Getting to know new arrivals’ faces quickly will pay dividends for an usher. Quick as a flash they will know which MEP is authorised to enter the chamber or a closed session meeting. They can thus show them where to sit as well as pass on a quick note from their assistant or a message from their political group.
A sort of parliamentary police force?

Not everyone is authorised to enter the chamber during a plenary session. The ushers who are present at these sessions therefore act as go-betweens for MEPs and their colleagues. Sometimes their job is trickier. Upon the request of the President of the session, they are transformed into parliamentary police officers when, as occasionally happens, an MEP persists in disrupting the debates.

Fortunately, such occasions are rare. When they do arise, ushers (still dressed in tails) surround the offending MEPs to persuade them not to make matters worse - which works most of the time! However, in order that all contingencies are covered, basic self-defence is now part of an usher’s professional training. A valuable element will be added to their training through a conflict management module aimed at further enhancing an usher’s powers of persuasion. As Michel Rousseau (see photo), the Parliament’s Head Usher recalls, “only once in my career did we have to eject an MEP from his seat – and that was a few years ago. Generally speaking we get on well together.”
Focus

Tails or suits?

Today there are 180 ushers serving the European Parliament’s three sites at Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg. There are also occasions when they are called upon to work elsewhere, such as when a political group meeting is held in one of the Parliament’s member states. Depending on the duties to be performed, there are two types of usher: floor ushers responsible for distributing mail and documents and ushers who work to ensure the smooth running of meetings. There are in total 121 ushers, who are civil servants recruited through a competitive process. Of these, 30 are responsible directly for the plenary sessions. The latter stand out on account of their ceremonial dress. Their tailcoats are made to measure and they are entitled to keep them as a memento when their time of service comes to an end. There is little in the way of hierarchy among ushers and all duties are alternated: although those associated with the plenary sessions require adequate knowledge and experience of Parliament’s layout and workings. The only distinguishing outward sign is that the Head Usher’s chain is gilded (the chains of the other ushers are silver plated).
The President’s usher

All ushers are at the service of the President of the European Parliament, but one usher is personally assigned to the President during their two-and-a-half year term of office. As much if not more so than all the other ushers, the President’s usher needs to demonstrate absolute discretion and to be always readily available – regardless of time and place. Susanne Ivarsson, who has been at the Parliament for close on nine years, was assigned to President Borrell at the start of his term of office. She acknowledges that “you can’t afford to have a bad day.” The President, accompanied by his usher, meets top level dignitaries: ambassadors, ministers, presidents and crowned heads. “The event must always go off without a hitch,” she says, and working days can be very, very long.
A revolutionary history

When the European Parliament was established, its first head of protocol was French. So many of the ushers’ roles and traditions are French in origin. The French word for “usher” is huissier (which is derived from huis meaning “door”) and both the term and the functions it covers are rooted in French history. The post itself was created in 1789 (the year of the French Revolution) to maintain order during the often impassioned debates in the newly-established French National Assembly. The tailcoats and chains worn by the European Parliament’s ushers can also be traced to traditions established in France. Up until the first direct European parliamentary elections, ushers (like the MEPs themselves) were drawn from the national parliaments. But, since 1979, they have been recruited in the same way as any other European civil servant. Today, 15 countries are represented in the ranks of the ushers, but this number is set to increase when recruitment for ushers from the European Union’s new member states gets underway.