

Intergroups: MEPs unite on single issues across party lines

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It will astonish no-one that the European Parliament contains political groups like the European People's Party, Socialists, and Liberals - to name just three. However, people may be surprised to learn that it also has 20 cross-party "intergroups" united on issues such as animal welfare, disabilities and anti-racism. That number jumps to 40 if we take in the non-registered ones such as the Kangaroo group that promotes freedom of movement.

Animal rights to bioethics

One of the largest intergroups in the Parliament is on animal welfare, with around 70 MEPs from all shades of the political spectrum. In the past it has campaigned successfully on baby seals and the EU directive on zoos. Neil Parish, the UK Conservative who Chairs the intergroup, said that "animal welfare is the issue raised most frequently in my mailbag....the intergroup is a powerful tool with which to fight the corner for animals..."

With 177 political parties from 27 countries represented in the European Parliament, it is perhaps inevitable that semi-formal groupings emerge around issues that cut across the party lines of Parliament's 8 political groups. Intergroups also exist for bioethics, health and consumer protection and Gay and Lesbian rights to name just three more.

Most of their meetings take place in Strasbourg Plenary week and are open to the public. They usually invite high level speakers, produce policy documents, prepare Parliamentary reports and resolutions and organise events.

Given their size, some intergroups are either assisted by the secretariat of a political group or have their own administration.

Status clarified in 1999

Amid concerns at the mushrooming of intergroups (in 1980 there was just 1) and concerns about their links with lobbyists, Parliament introduced new rules governing their status in 1999. The rules require at least three political groups to support the founding of any new group. In addition, they must declare any support they received from whatever quarter.

The status of the intergroups was also clarified. They may not describe themselves as organs of the Parliament (as its committees and delegations are), and are not allowed to officially express the view of the Parliament. In addition, they cannot use the EP logo and "cannot undertake activities which might result in confusion with official EP activities". Nevertheless, it is clear that the role and number of intergroups will continue to grow in the Parliament if MEPs interests continue to expand to new fields.

Further information

- Animal welfare Intergroup: <http://www.eurogroupforanimals.org/>