

The rottweiler: Neil Parish

By [Patricia Kelly](#)

19.04.2007 / 00:00 CET

If Neil Parish has enemies then they are well hidden. There is an anonymous comment posted on a Conservative party website blog that his recent selection as a prospective candidate for the UK national parliament is a “real triumph for mediocrity”, but that has the whiff of sour grapes about it. By the time the UK general election is held, Parish will have served more than ten years in the European Parliament, one of three Conservatives representing south-west England. And while there may be an element of resentment born of jealousy from those who begrudge his success, political friends and foes alike recognise that he has worked extremely hard to get where he is.

He left school at the age of 16 with no qualifications, to work on the family farm, taking over from his father and continuing to run the business until the pressures of political life took over.

Born in the area he represents – he will turn 51 next month – Parish has lived his entire life on the farm where his widowed mother still lives. Currently the only UK Conservative in the European Parliament to hold a committee chair – the powerful one of agriculture – he is tipped as ministerial material should the Conservatives come to power in the UK and he makes it to Westminster. Make it he most certainly will, as the Devonshire seat of Tiverton and Honiton he will represent is a traditional Conservative area and considered politically safe, as well as being one of the most picturesque constituencies in England. But with no prior Westminster experience, it is likely to be a couple of years before Parish makes the Conservative front bench.

Parish is politically ambitious and is said to live and breathe his constituency. He won the nomination for Tiverton in the first ballot, having devoted every evening and weekend he was home from Brussels and Strasbourg to making sure everyone knew who he was. Not particularly difficult, since it is part of the south-west area he already represents in the European Parliament and rarely a week goes by without him making an appearance on local radio or television. But he is not an ideologue and does not play party political games, being more of a straight talker who prefers action to words.

Parish started out in local politics, serving on parish, district and county councils in Somerset and was first elected to the Parliament in 1999. A devoted family man with a son and daughter of university ages, Parish and his wife Sue, a teacher, are said to be a double act, both of them devoted to his political career, a model couple.

Shorter than average and slightly rotund, Parish makes up in personality what he lacks in height. He is a whirlwind of activity, giving the impression he never stays still for very long. One of his political opposites in the Parliament describes Parish as “personable” – it is difficult to find anyone who dislikes him – but says he suspects him of being “shallow”, accusing him of a tendency to jump on other people’s bandwagons for the sake of publicity. The same person adds with a sigh: “He’s a pretty nice guy actually.”

Never one to pass up an opportunity for self-promotion in the press, Parish recently drove a hybrid car to Strasbourg following reports that MEPs produce 190,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide each year with the

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Parliament's monthly excursions to Strasbourg – an exercise in hot air that he regards as a complete waste of time, effort and money. But he will not be caught out not putting his money where his mouth is – he drives a gas-powered car back home and promotes the production of bio-fuels as a way of providing new business opportunities for British farmers.

Although technically no longer a farmer, Parish is quick to champion the farmer's cause. He is the scourge of Defra, the UK government's notoriously inefficient Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which he has constantly attacked for failing to get EU payments out to farmers on time.

Faced with the refusal of the UK government to launch an official inquiry into the causes of the 2001 foot-and-mouth epidemic in the UK which effectively closed down the British countryside, Parish battled single-mindedly and virtually single-handedly against huge political opposition from all sides to set up a temporary committee of inquiry in the European Parliament, persuading all concerned that the lessons to be learned were too important for the issue to be swept under the carpet. The inquiry was greeted positively by the British media, generally more prone to publishing EU-bashing stories, and established Parish as a doughty fighter, delivering a metaphorical bloody nose to many within the European Parliament who had looked down their noses at him, too quick to dismiss him as a lightweight when he was first elected to join their ranks. He was number four on the list in 1999, rising to number one in the 2004 direct elections.

There are those in the Parliament who question the wisdom of having farmers running the powerful agriculture committee: Parish took the chair from French farmer Joseph Daul who became leader of the Parliament's EPP-ED group in a recent reshuffle of the top political posts. The announcement of his appointment by Parish's office read: "The selection of a more free-market liberal-thinking chairman than the agriculture committee has seen in recent years should make it far easier for comprehensive reform of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) to be achieved."

But critics say it is difficult to see how reform could be easier because the committee is packed with farmers who they claim traditionally oppose any changes to the CAP that might damage them financially. The statement went on to pledge that Parish would always put farmers' interests first, which is exactly what the critics oppose, arguing that agriculture is about more than just farmers with the business of the committee embracing all aspects of food production and the rural economy.

An indefatigable campaigner for animal welfare – he is president of the Parliament's animal welfare intergroup, a cross-party pressure group which also attracts criticism from the animal rights lobby for having a former farmer at the helm – Parish is genuinely repulsed by brutality to animals. But he still borrows an animal analogy when he hears talk of reviving the EU constitution, which he describes as akin to flogging a dead horse. He is also reported to have been described as an animal by David Miliband, the minister in charge of Defra who is said to have likened him to a rottweiler for his dogged persistence. Likeable, straight-talking, hard-working he may be, mediocre he most definitely is not.

The CV

1956: Born, Bridgwater, Somerset, England

1972: Left school to work on family farm

1983-95: Councillor, Sedgemoor District Council

1989-95: Deputy leader of the Council

1989-93: Councillor, Somerset County Council

1999: Elected to the European Parliament
2007: Appointed chairman of committee on agriculture
and rural development

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