

Politics on borrowed time

The walls of Magid Magid's office in the European Parliament are bare. This is understandable, as the newly elected Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for Britain's Green Party is in Brussels on a potentially short-term contract. At the time we are conducting this interview, the looming Brexit deadline means he could be packing up again, so decorating may turn out to be a pointless exercise.

Interview with British MEP Magid Magid

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Not your average politician: British MEP Magid Magid in front of the European Parliament in Brussels.
Image: © Chris Saunders



Five months in political office is just long enough to make an impression, and Magid Magid is an expert at this. Black, young, Muslim, and very outspoken, he does not look, talk or dress like your average EU politician. Born in Somalia, Magid came to the UK as a child with his family, as refugees from the civil war. He grew up in Sheffield, a city with an industrial, working class heritage in the northern region of Yorkshire, where he joined the Green Party. First elected as a local councillor, the young Magid made national headlines in 2018 when he became Sheffield's Lord Mayor, a civic leadership position that exists in the major cities of the UK. Revolutionising the traditionally ceremonial role, the young activist-turned-politician had his official photograph taken perched on a balustrade of the town hall staircase, pairing his heavy gold chain of office with green Dr. Marten boots. With strongly pro-immigrant and anti-racist politics, when Mr Magid isn't challenging the status quo verbally or on his Twitter feed, he lets his T-shirts do the talking, which usually bear such messages as "Immigrants Make Britain Great" or "F*** Fascism". He is a campaigner for Remain but is not uncritical of the European Union (EU). Now he's set to shake up European politics, even if he only has a short time to do it in.

Magid Magid, your communication style is a very creative one, even theatrical. For example, as Lord Mayor of Sheffield, you "banned" Donald Trump from the city and declared a "Mexico Solidarity Day" (while wearing a sombrero). Have you brought some of this style to your MEP role?

That's a good question. I always try to engage people. For me it's all about trying to capture people's attention with a positive message. Especially when attention spans are getting shorter, the question is: how do you cut through the noise?

But I'm sad to say that I've not done as much as I'd like to in this role, mainly because

of Brexit. It's kind of stifled my creativity in some way. Before, I felt like I could think ahead. I had the privilege of being able to plan things, whereas now it's just a bit chaotic. A week is a long time in politics, but with Brexit it's literally hours.

You may only be here for a short time in the European Parliament if Brexit goes ahead. What can you hope to achieve in this time?

I've been trying to spend as much time as possible in the UK, because I still think we're going to have to put Brexit back to the British people, either as a general election or a people's vote. Or possibly both. I'd hate to think that even out of the four months I was MEP I had a month's holiday – that's why I didn't have a holiday in August. So, in the region that I represent, Yorkshire and Humber, I've been having conversations with people, "Brexiters", who didn't vote for me. I'm a big advocate of having difficult, awkward conversations and trying to find some commonality. It's also about mobilising the Remain people, getting them enthused.

You've voiced support for a second referendum. What do you think about the arguments, from both the Right and the Left, that this could be considered undemocratic?

Democracy is not static. We are currently being pushed towards a no-deal Brexit. That wasn't on the ballot paper, nobody campaigned for it. Some people who voted for Brexit still want to have some sort of EU rights. It's in everyone's interest to vote and campaign against this. At the end of the day, the Leave campaign was based on lies and fear, where they broke electoral rules. We need to have a fair and honest referendum, and Remain needs to be on the ballot.

But I also don't think anybody can campaign for just "Remain" because that, in my

opinion, is accepting the status quo. We need to remain and reform. We need to put forward a proposition of how we want the European Union to change. For example, Ursula von der Leyen [the newly elected European Commission President], where did she come from? Out of nowhere. It would be great if every European citizen had the opportunity to vote for the Commission President. We should also have multiple candidates, proposed by the European Parliament, rather than just a couple of people suggested by the European Council of heads of state or government of the Member States.

And what about European politics, beyond Brexit? If this potentially short time in your MEP role means you have to prioritise, what are the most important issues for you?

A big focus for me has been refugees. I'm from Somalia and my family had to flee civil conflict. We ended up in Sheffield, which has a very long, rich history of welcoming people from all over the world. But nobody chooses to leave their home, their friends, their community and everything they have unless they have no other choice.

I think the refugee crisis is the defining characteristic of the European Union. We need to stop acting as if it's a nuisance of some sort. You can't sit on the fence. You can't be in the middle of what's right and what's wrong. Of course, some things aren't black and white, but we're talking about the preservation of human life, especially when it comes to unaccompanied child refugees, who are so vulnerable to persecution and trafficking.

One of the things I really want is for the EU to be tougher on states like Italy who [under the previous government] were happy to turn the Mediterranean into some sort of cemetery. Or the UK, for example, which does not take its fair share of refugees. I want to see the political will to back policies and legislation where the EU takes a more active role. I also want the EU to create safe

passages for people and to end the detention centres in Libya.

Do you think the discourse around migration, race and ethnicity has become more toxic in recent years?

Definitely. It was one of the driving forces and tools used to get people to vote for Brexit. But it's nonsense. We know, statistically, economically – every factor you want to look at – that immigrants are more of a gain to the British economy, culture, everything, than they are a drain.

Even the language that's used, such as being an "illegal" immigrant... Nobody can be "illegal". All these words have meaning. Dehumanising people causes murder.

You yourself experienced an incident in Strasbourg, when an individual in the Parliament asked you to leave on your first day of work, which drew the attention of anti-racist activists. Have you encountered a lot of prejudice in the "EU bubble"?

It's nothing that's exclusive to the European Parliament. You find it in a lot of different spaces and environments. We've all been socially conditioned to expect what a politician looks like, and when a person of colour is in a position of authority, people are just genuinely a bit baffled. At the beginning, I got people asking me which MEP I work for.

On the whole, the people that we elect to be our leaders do not reflect the people that they are there to represent. And if we're really talking about having an equal and fair society, we need to address that problem.

There isn't a day that goes by that I don't get some sort of racist abuse, whether that be through social media, email, letters. People always say, "maybe you should tone it down a bit Magid, maybe you shouldn't be too political". But I haven't got that privilege. I'm a black, Muslim refugee living in this current political climate. It would be such an injustice

if I didn't use my platform or voice to really challenge things and champion certain causes. It is what it is and I'm thick-skinned. In any case, here in the Parliament I can't tell a fascist from a non-fascist because they all wear suits – so I just smile and say hi.

You're a member of the Green Party, and in these recent European elections we saw what some people called a "green wave". Trade unions often talk of the importance of ensuring a "just transition". Do you also think this needs to be a central part of climate policy?

Absolutely, and it's our responsibility to create it. That means training people to develop new skills to be able to work in the renewables sector. When we talk about climate justice, social justice has to go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other. So we need to look at how our economy functions, we need to make sure there are sustainable jobs for people, that people aren't living on the poverty line and that they receive a living wage on which they don't just survive but also thrive. All these things are interlinked.

Every European country has their own problems, they're all at different stages. I appreciate that there can't be one blanket policy for all. But we [the Greens] would love for every EU country, as part of their budget review, to prioritise climate change and to bring emission cuts to the bare minimum. And we need to start working with the developing EU countries and making sure that everyone's pulling their weight and working towards that – which means there also need to be sanctions. We're doing this to protect our planet and everyone's in it together. ●