

MEPs walk out as Czech president scorns their 'democratic deficit'

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Members of the European parliament walked out in protest yesterday after Vaclav Klaus, the Czech Republic president, said the institution suffered a "democratic deficit" and likened its workings to those of eastern Europe during the communist era.

In his first address to the parliament, Mr Klaus characterised the institution as one that alienated voters and offered no credible opposition. He argued that decision-making powers should be pushed out of Brussels and back to individual member states.

Mr Klaus said: "Here, only one single alternative is being promoted and those who dare thinking about a different option are labelled as enemies of European integration. Not so long ago, in our part of Europe we lived in a political system that permitted no alternatives."

Members could be seen throwing up their hands and streaming towards the exits.

Mr Klaus further enraged his hosts when he later refused to say whether he would sign the Lisbon treaty, a key measure to further European Union integration that would also strengthen the role of the European parliament.

"A chess player does not reveal his next moves," he said, in reference to the document, which was approved by the Czech parliament this week and is expected to be put to Irish voters in a second referendum this year.

Mr Klaus's euro-scepticism is well known. Nonetheless, his performance presented yet another distraction for the Czech Republic's first EU presidency, which began six weeks ago with an art installation that mocked fellow member states.

It has since been dogged by questions - from France, in particular - about the country's fitness to lead the bloc through the economic and financial crisis.

After Mr Klaus left the stage, members of parliament issued competing statements lambasting his remarks. Graham Watson, head of the Alliance of Liberal Democrats, said they were "astonishing", the Labour party's Richard Corbett described them as "disappointing and frankly embarrassing", while the Green party's Milan Horacek said they were "facile and boorish".

Mr Klaus, however, appeared unruffled and unrepentant. He said of his appearance: "I enjoyed it very much. I think for a speaker the worst outcome would be a total silence or a lack of reaction."

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