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e-fa: Strasbourg Round-Up

News bulletin from the European Free Alliance Group in the European Parliament

This week in Strasbourg: 14 - 17 September

The European Parliament has been meeting in Strasbourg this week. Issues on the agenda have included the re-appointment of José Manuel Barroso as EU Commission President, milk prices and the problems facing the agricultural sector, the future of car manufacturer Opel, and the EU's response to forest fires.

Barroso endorsed in vote

José Manuel Barroso's candidature for a second term as EU Commission President was endorsed in a vote on Wednesday, with the former Portuguese Prime Minister gaining strong support from many in the Conservative and Liberal groups.

But EFA MEPs were less enthusiastic about Barroso's nomination. Speaking in the debate that preceded the vote, Plaid Cymru MEP Jill Evans (EFA Group President) told Barroso: *"You talk in your guidelines about the need to create a "feeling of connection between the EU and its citizens." But this can never be achieved unless the EU recognises the real nations and peoples and subsidiarity operates at all levels, not just between the EU and the member state government. To be effective the EU needs the input of all of us. That includes Wales, Scotland, Catalunya, Corsica, Flanders and many others."*

The SNP's Alyn Smith explained why he had not voted in favour of Mr Barroso. Smith said: *"Mr Barroso was duly approved in a secret ballot and I wish him well. Personally I voted against, on the grounds that Mr Barroso has continued in his five years with the confusing rhetoric about what the EU, and the European Commission in particular, is actually for. I see the EU as a gathering of states acting together, not, as I suspect Mr Barroso sees it, as an entity in its own right with the states mere hindrances to the integration project."*

In a secret ballot, Mr Barroso won the support of 382 MEPs, 219 voted against, and there were 117 abstentions.

Car manufacturer Opel

MEPs on Monday night debated the sale of car maker Opel to the Austrian-Canadian consortium Magna and the risk of job losses. Frieda Brepoels (N-VA) called on the European Commission to act swiftly in order to help the company, whose Antwerp plant is under threat.

Brepoels called on the Commission to look into the role of the German government and the state support given to Magna. The Flemish MEP commented: *"The European Commission must act swiftly. If they fail to*

do so, then a very unfortunate precedent will be set for all future cross-border restructuring where the smaller member states will be forced out of the market."

Brepoels also questioned the credibility of any financial savings that were to be made, noting that the Antwerp operation is threatened with closure whilst the poorer performing German operation at Bochum is spared. Brepoels added: *"Takeovers on such a scale must be resolved in such a way that the solidarity between workers in the different EU member states is protected based on economic merit rather than political motives."*

Forest Fires

The EU could do much more to help countries like Corsica and Catalunya deal with forest forest according to Corsican MEP François Alfonsi. In a debate on Monday evening, Alfonsi called for more EU funding to help areas like Corsica deal with the aftermath of this summer's forest fires. He also urged the Commission to make progress in setting up a Europe wide civil protection force which could be mobilised at short notice to help deal with this kind of disaster.

Speaking in the European Parliament, Alfonsi explained: *"This summer, Corsica was the victim of very serious fires, as was Sardinia, Catalonia, Greece, the Canary Islands and many other parts of Europe. In order to help all of the people affected by these fires, our group would like to see some European solidarity through the use of the EU Solidarity Fund." Alfonsi went on to explain the need for joint action at EU level. "The lesson is simple: when we are overcome by such weather conditions - conditions which can be both foreseen and anticipated - we need to be able to rely on the support of a European civil protection force which can quickly respond with the necessary reinforcements."*

Wales, Scotland and NI must approve EU Commissioner

Plaid's Jill Evans and the SNP's Alyn Smith want the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to be given a role in choosing the UK's next European Commissioner.

Evans explained: *"Wales is at a disadvantage in not having direct representation in Europe and it is the UK government that votes for Wales when the ministers of the 27 member states decide on new laws. Why should the decision on who represents us be left to Gordon Brown? We need to get the voice of Wales heard in the Commission. In the European Parliament we have confirmation hearings for Commissioners. In the same way the Assembly should have the right to question the nominee on issues that matter to us in Wales."*

Evans and Smith are calling for the person nominated to appear before the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly and be approved by all three before being confirmed as the UK nominee. They have written to London Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and the heads of each of the European Committees of the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, Northern Irish Assembly, and Houses of Commons and Lords European Scrutiny Committees.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland join forces in Strasbourg

The SNP's Ian Hudghton praised the Scottish Government's EU Representation for teaming up with the devolved administrations of Wales and Northern Ireland to put on an exhibition at the European Parliament in Strasbourg this week. He said that it was vital for Scotland to have a strong voice in Europe, and that it was particularly important to get Scottish interests firmly on the European agenda at the start of the new European Parliament's term.

Hudghton commented: *"Increasingly the European Union is taking and making decisions that affect all our lives. That's why I'm delighted to see Scotland taking the initiative in this way, along with the Welsh and*

Northern Irish administrations, to put us firmly on the map. This initiative also provided an opportunity to demonstrate the Scottish Government's action on climate change, as the EU debates its strategy in the run-up to the Copenhagen meeting in December, and was also an ideal opportunity to promote the excellence of Scotland's food and drink products."

Baltic Sea Strategy

MEPs debated the EU's proposed ?50 billion plan for economic regeneration in the Baltic Sea region. Tatjana Zdanoka criticised the proposals for failing to put sufficient emphasis on social protection. Zdanoka noted that Latvia has been particularly badly hit by the economic crisis and has received substantial EU aid to deal with its balance of payments deficit. The MEP criticised the European Commission for allowing the Latvian government to cut pensions and benefits whilst receiving this aid, cuts which have had a detrimental effect on standards of living in Latvia.

Speaking in Parliament, Zdanoka said: *"As an MEP elected in Latvia I do welcome that the first example of a Strategy for a 'macro-region' is one targeting the Baltic Sea Area. Nevertheless, in my opinion a number of Community objectives have been forgotten here. For instance, a high level of social protection. Latvia has recently received medium-term financial assistance for balance of payments provided by the Commission. Unfortunately, there are no social conditions for such assistance. As a result, the government is reducing pensions and benefits, yet the Commission tolerates this. The Baltic Sea Strategy must be more ambitious and deal with problems related to all of the objectives of the European Union."*

Crisis in the dairy farming sector

On Thursday MEPs debated the severe problems facing dairy farmers across Europe. They also looked at the issue of milk prices and a proposal to extend public aid until February 2010. The dairy sector has been hard hit by falling milk prices and by consequences of the wider economic crisis.

Catalan MEP Oriol Junqeras spoke in the debate and criticised the detrimental effect of distribution oligopolies in driving down milk prices which and the effect of this on producers. He called on the European Commission to intervene in the sector and set a minimum price that distributors should pay producers, related to the final price for the consumer, in order for the market to function properly.

The Catalan MEP began his intervention in his native language, expressing regret that he is not currently allowed to speak Catalan in Parliament and receive simultaneous translation.

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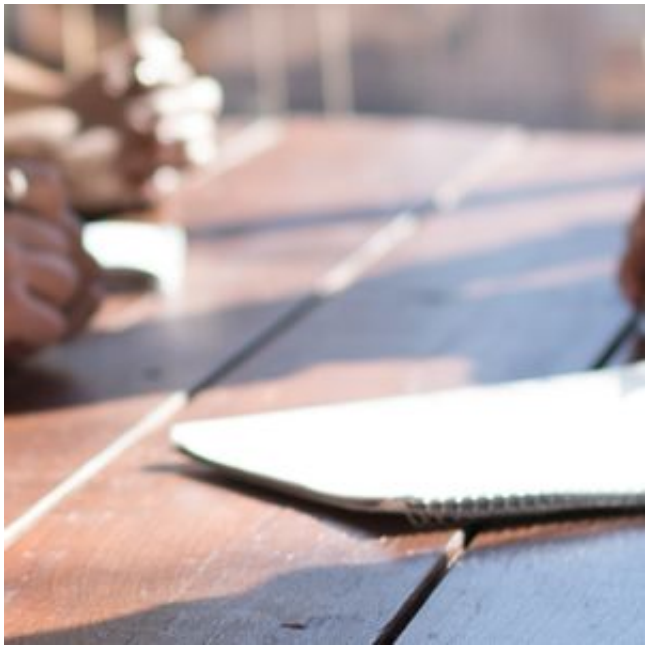

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