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e-fa: News Round-Up

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

April 2012 Round-Up

The European Free Alliance (EFA) draws together political parties fighting for democracy and self-determination for the stateless nations and regions of Europe. European Free Alliance MEPs sit in a European parliamentary group with the Greens, making up the fourth largest group in the European parliament.

EFA MEPs are:

Jill Evans MEP - Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales (EFA Group President)
Ian Hudghton MEP - Scottish National Party (EFA Group Vice-President)
Frieda Brepoels MEP - Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (EFA Group Vice-President)
François Alfonsi MEP - U Partitu di a Nazione Corsa - Europe Ecologie
Ana Miranda MEP - Bloque Nacionalista Galego
Alyn Smith MEP - Scottish National Party
Tatjana Ždanoka MEP - For Human Rights in a United Latvia



Key issues this month include:

- Conference to support Basque peace
- Parliament backs more enforceable passenger rights
- EFA General Assembly in Friesland
- Airline passenger data concerns
- Argentina's right to decide on its natural resources
- Call for more support for young farmers
- Backing for fee-free higher education
- Europe can learn from Wales in dealing with autism
- Loophole closed for airline crew social security
- Backing Kurdish hunger strikers
- Call for dialogue in Mali

Conference to support Basque peace

EFA and the European Parliament's Basque Friendship Group, hosted a conference in the Parliament at the end of March to discuss the outcomes of the Aiete conference, and the prospects for building a lasting peace in the Basque Country.

The international conference (Aiete), which took place at Donostia/San Sebastian in October 2011, was attended by international figures including Kofi Annan, Gro Harlem Bruntland, Bertie Ahern, Pierre Joxe, Gerry Adams.

Keynote speaker at the Brussels event was Jonathan Powell, one of the endorsers of the Aiete declaration, and formerly the chief of staff to the UK Prime Minister, who played an important role in the peace process in Ireland.

The conference focussed on the role of the European Union and the European institutions including the European Parliament in supporting the ongoing peace process and resolution of Europe's last armed conflict. EFA MEPs **François Alfonsi** and **Frieda Brepoels** also spoke at the event.

François commented: *"The Spanish government has to demonstrate that it can behave responsibly in dealing with the Basque Country, in much the same way that the then UK government of which Jonathan Powell was part, was able to do in relation to Northern Ireland. Peace in the Basque Country is a necessity for Europe just as much as peace in Northern Ireland was. The EU must get involved in supporting this."*

Frieda said: *"The Aiete conference has without any doubt been a major breakthrough and is really an ultimate chance for bulding a sustainable peace. Moving forward, negotiations on the fate of political prisoners, the disarming of ETA and dealing with questions of guilt and atonement will require the utmost of the political parties involved."*

Parliament backs more enforceable passenger rights

N-VA MEP **Frieda Brepoels** supported new EU rules to improve the rights of airline passengers, which got the backing of MEPs at the end of March. Whilst EU legislation already exists to help passengers affected by delays, cancellations or to guarantee the rights of mobility impaired passengers, some problems still remain.

Brepoels welcomed the European Commission's decision to bring forward legislation filling some of the

gaps in passenger's rights. The N-VA MEP commented: *"Surveys have shown that airline passengers in Europe are often not fully aware of their rights under EU law. This was seen very clearly during the volcanic ash cloud crisis in 2010. Lessons must be learned from these experiences and it is vital that comprehensive, accurate and timely information is available for passengers."*

Aspects of the new legislation include a standard complaints procedure, safeguards to ensure greater ticket price transparency, and a clearer definition of what exactly constitutes "extraordinary circumstances" and "cancellation."

EFA General Assembly in Friesland

The EFA European political party held its annual General Assembly in Leeuwarden, Friesland at the end of March and several MEPs from the EFA group took part.

The conference coincided with the 50th anniversary of local EFA member party the FNP (Fryske Nasjonale Partij), which defends the Frisian language, culture and identity. They used the conference to highlight their opposition to centralising urban planning controls in the Netherlands, which they feel would be to the detriment of Friesland.

Plaid Cymru MEP **Jill Evans**, President of the EFA Group in the European Parliament said: *"We are now barely two years away from the next European elections. The preparations for those elections have already begun, and I know that EFA parties across Europe will be working hard to ensure a bigger and more diverse group of Members of the European Parliament next time around. All over Europe people are losing faith in distant political elites in the old member states, particularly in their failure to deal with the economic crisis. If they are the old Europe, then we are the new Europe. Europe is moving in our direction and we will continue working together to make that happen."*

Airline passenger data concerns

Several EFA MEPs expressed concerns about new arrangement for giving personal airline passenger details to the US authorities. Plaid MEP **Jill Evans** spoke out after the vote in the European Parliament allowing the transfer of personal information on all airline passengers to the US Department of Homeland Security.

Jill said that the European Commission had not presented factual evidence to show that this mass transfer of information was necessary to prevent terrorist offences or serious crime.

Jill commented: *"This decision means that all travellers to the United States will be profiled, their information put into categories and stored for fifteen years. This can include sensitive information such as sexuality, racial origin, religious beliefs, and details about physical and mental health. There are few safeguards in terms of data protection. I do not believe it is necessary to collect and store all of this information on travellers from Wales and elsewhere unless they can show a very good reason for doing so."*

Frieda Brepoels said: *"In the fight against terrorism, co-operation with the US and other countries is certainly necessary. But when it's a question of handing over huge amounts of personal passenger information, then solid guarantees need to be given in order to protect the fundamental rights of EU citizens. That is not the case with this agreement."*

Argentina's right to decide on its natural resources

Galician MEP **Ana Miranda** (BNG) backed Argentina's right to decide for itself how best to use its own energy resources, in both the public interest and in the interest of its citizens.

Ana made the call during a debate in the European Parliament in Strasbourg that followed the Argentinean government's decision to nationalise part of its oil industry. This would be to the detriment of Spanish company Repsol, which has a major stake in Argentina's YPF oil company.

Ana said: *"We've been discussing the legal security of European investments outside the EU, but in the name of this legal security European companies must also live up to their own commitments."*

She said that Spain's YPF had not lived up to commitments in their investment agreements, despite making a profit of 16bn euros over the past yen years. The company had "compromised the energy self sufficiency of a sovereign country and caused a dramatic reduction in oil and gas production."

Ana added that *"a country with the capacity to be self sufficient in terms of energy finds itself forced to spend 11bn dollars on oil and gas imports - money that could be better spent on the needs of its people."*

The European Parliament backed a resolution criticising the Argentinean government, but less strongly that had been predicted.

Call for more support for young farmers

SNP MEP **Alyn Smith**, a member of the European Parliament's Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, called for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to prioritise younger farmers.

An ageing population is one of the major challenges facing European farming, with the percentage of farmers under the age of 35 decreasing from 8.5% in 2003 to 6.1% in 2007 - there are roughly 5 farmers aged 65 and over for every farmer under 35. In the UK, just 2.6% of farmers were aged under 35 in 2007.

The Scottish Government already provides interest rate relief for a commercial business development loan for young farmers. The European Commission has proposed a new five year top up payment, additional to the Single Farm Payment, for farmers under the age of 40, valued at around a quarter of the value of the entitlements the young farmer already receives.

Alyn said: *"Encouraging younger people, with their skills, enthusiasm and innovative mentality, into farming is vital for the future of our food production and the vitality of the rural economy. Aside from the simple fact that we will need new people to eventually take over the existing farm acreage, younger farmers are also more likely to take risks and diversify into new fields of enterprise, such as renewable energy and tourism, all of which broadens the revenue base of the farm and makes it more financially secure and protected against the volatility of markets."*

Backing for fee-free higher education

SNP MEP **Ian Hudghton** used a debate at the European Parliament in Strasbourg to highlight the importance of free access to higher education, and the Scottish government's fee-free higher education policy.

MEPs were debating a report on modernising Europe's higher education systems by former EFA MEP Lázló Tökés, a Hungarian speaking Romanian MEP from Transylvania.

Ian commented: *"In the section entitled 'Funding higher education systems', this report stresses that higher education is a public good that fosters culture, diversity, democratic values and personal development. This lies at the heart of the Scottish government's policy of providing higher education without fees in line with Scotland's democratic intellectual tradition."*

Europe can learn from Wales in dealing with autism

Plaid MEP **Jill Evans** organised a meeting with the European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy to discuss the pioneering Welsh Autism strategy, in Strasbourg in April. Jill was joined for the meeting with Commissioner Dalli by Hugh Morgan, the Chief Executive of Autism Cymru - Wales' national charity for autism.

They presented the the strategy to Commissioner Dalli, which is the first of its kind in the world. The Commissioner heaped praise on Wales' autism strategy and said that autism would likely be a priority for the forthcoming Irish presidency of the European Union.

After the meeting Jill commented: *"The work done on autism in Wales will be further highlighted next year, when Ireland takes over the Presidency of the European Union. It has already announced its intention to make autism a priority. Wales' autism strategy shows how we can help make a real difference to the lives of people suffering from autism and their families. We will continue to promote our national strategy to show what Wales has achieved and how we can share that with other countries. I am grateful for the Commissioner's support and I look forward to working with Autism Cymru on future events."*

Loophole closed for airline crew social security

N-VA MEP **Frieda Brepoels** strongly backed new rules governing the social security arrangements applicable to airline flight crew.

At present, flight crew are subject to the requirements of the country where an airline is based. However under the new proposals personnel would take advantage of the arrangements in the country where they normally begin and end their working day.

Frieda hailed the legislation as an important step in dealing with unfair competition from low-cost airlines able to base themselves in countries with with low employment costs.

She said: *"Today low-cost airlines are able to exploit gaps in the law on employing flight crew. We see this in Belgium with Ryanair at Charleroi employing mostly Belgian based personnel on cheaper Irish contracts. These new rules will help create a more level playing field in the aviation industry in Europe, and is fairer for airline personnel."*

Backing Kurdish hunger strikers

EFA MEPs including Frieda Brepoels, François Alfonsi, Ana Miranda, Tatjana Zdanoka and Jill Evans met Kurdish human rights activist Layla Zana at the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

Ms Zana visited the European Parliament to highlight the plight of Kurdish hunger strikers at the St Maurice Church in Strasbourg who have gone more than 50 days without food.

They want the Council of Europe to investigate claims of torture against the Kurdish people, and more widely the recognition of the Kurdish people's fundamental rights. The hunger strikers have since given up their hunger strike.

Call for dialogue in Mali

Corsican MEP **François Alfonsi**, founder of the European Parliament's friendship group with the Amazigh people, has asked the EU to intervene and encourage dialogue in the current unrest in Mali. The European Parliament debated the issue in April, with Baroness Ashton, the EU's Foreign Affairs

representative.

François spoke of the marginalisation of the Touareg people who've traditionally lived in the Azawad region of northern Mali.

He said: *"All of the commitments made to the Touareg people of Mali over the past thirty years have been broken. Now we have a situation where their national liberation movement is fighting for recognition of the historic and cultural rights of the Touareg people in Mali. That all seems quite legitimate and the EU has a role to play in encouraging dialogue to help make that happen peacefully."*

The national liberation movement - MNLA - unilaterally declared the independence of Azawad on 6 April.

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