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# e-fa: News Round-Up

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

### March 2013 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)
**Mark Demesmaeker MEP** - Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie
**François Alfonsi MEP** - U Partitu di a Nazione Corsa - Europe Ecologie
**Ana Miranda MEP** - Bloque Nacionalista Galego
**Alyn Smith MEP** - Scottish National Party
**Tatjana Zdanoka MEP** - For Human Rights in a United Latvia



**Highlights this month include:**

- Agriculture policy reform
- Horsemeat Scandal and local food
- EU Budget
- Fighting against racism and xenophobia
- Tackling gender stereotypes

**Agriculture policy reform**

After months of intense negotiations, in March the European Parliament finally adopted its position on reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. Agricultural subsidies make up over forty per cent of the EU's budget, but this could fall.

EFA MEPs **Alyn Smith** (Scotland) and **Jill Evans** (Wales) have been working hard to ensure that the interests of rural Scotland and Wales are protected in the reformed policy.

Describing the result as a 'mixed bag', the MEPs noted that further work would need to be done to reach a final agreement between the European Parliament and Council.

Speaking after the vote, SNP MEP and Agriculture Committee member Alyn Smith said: *"This final vote has been a mixed bag with a few steps forward, a few setbacks but, by and large, I am quite satisfied with the result. There were a few red lines for me on the Direct Payments Report. However, thanks to the failure of the attempt to delete coupled support and the rejection of efforts to include mandatory but unworkable crop rotation measures, I was pleased to add my support.*

*"Rural Development saw the firm rejection of double payments by the Parliament. Less Favoured Area reform has also been officially postponed for two years until we have adequate data upon which we can base our discussions which is a good move."*

In Wales, CAP direct payments (from Pillar I) account for 80% of farm income and 17,000 farmers from all sectors are dependent on them.

Speaking after the vote, Plaid MEP Jill Evans said: *"With the proper policies and support, Welsh farming and rural communities can have a prosperous future. Parliament's vote did have some positive outcomes. For example, one of the main concerns of the farming industry was that not enough time would be provided for the changeover to a new payment regime. I believe that this has been overcome in the parliament vote. We also gave support to young farmers and community ownership projects. Another issue of great concern was cross compliance penalties and the system supported by MEPs is much more proportionate.*

*"However, on the negative side, on greening the parliament reverted to the Commission original proposal for three greening measures: permanent pasture, crop diversification and ecological focus areas. The Agriculture Committee has proposed that existing agri-environment schemes should be recognised as greening by definition. This is something I will be pushing in the debates with the council. Welsh farmers cannot be penalised for having led the way in Europe on environmental schemes."*

**Horsemeat scandal and local food**

The scandal of horsemeat being labelled as beef and entering the food chain has dominated in the European Parliament in recent weeks.

The European Commission has ordered thousands of DNA tests to be carried across the EU to gauge the scale of the problem. The question of traceability has come into focus with consumers demanding to know where their food comes from and how it was produced.

Plaid MEP **Jill Evans** highlighted the issue at a specially organised Welsh farmhouse breakfast in the European Parliament. Ms Evans used the event to emphasise the importance of buying locally and praised the quality of Welsh meat and dairy produce.

Speaking after the breakfast in Parliament, Ms Evans said: *"This was a good opportunity to show off some excellent Welsh farm produce to EU law makers. Events like this ensure that Wales is known as a nation with first class agricultural and food industries. The horse-meat scandal has shaken consumer confidence. We can help restore that by bringing in laws on labelling that ensure food is what it claims to be on the packet, that people know where it comes from and that it is safe. I have campaigned for this but current rules do not apply to meat used as an ingredient in processed food."*

*"One positive result of the scandal is that people are taking a lot more interest in the food they buy and where they buy it. I welcome the fact that many people are buying more locally which will help agriculture, the economy and the environment."*

N-VA MEP **Mark Demesmaeker** raised the issue with the European Commission in a meeting of Parliament's Environment and Public Health Committee. He insisted that fraudsters should be made to pay for their actions, but cautioned against over-reacting and imposing new restrictions that would weaken the food industry. Demesmaeker commented: *"The consumer has been deceived and we have to restore the confidence that's been lost. But let's not legislate too hastily on this. Additional legislation is not necessarily the right solution."*

**Basque prisoners event**

EFA MEP **François Alfonsi** co-hosted a conference in the European Parliament on the thorny question of political prisoners in relation to the Basque peace process.

There are believed to be over five hundred Basque political prisoners currently being held in Spanish jails, most of them outside the Basque Country and far away from their families. A permanent ceasefire was declared in the Basque conflict in October 2011, but the prisoners issue continues to cause controversy.

Corsican MEP François Alfonsi has been a strident campaigner for a strong EU role in support of the Basque peace process, citing the EU's PEACE funding programme which supported the Irish peace process, as a model.

**EU budget negotiations**

The European Parliament also fixed its negotiating position on the future EU budget during its March plenary session.

Some EFA MEPs oppose a cut to the budget fearing the effects of austerity and a loss of funds for their areas. Other EFA MEPs argue that the EU cannot demand a budget increase whilst ordinary people suffer due to deep public spending cuts in the Member States.

A majority in the European Parliament adopted a resolution rejecting the position taken by the 27 EU governments to cut the future EU budget.
Plaid MEP **Jill Evans** is one of those opposed to cutting the budget which she says creates jobs and helps growth in the Welsh economy. She welcomed the Parliament vote and resolved to oppose any budget that

contained cuts in the funding coming to Wales.

Speaking in the plenary session in Strasbourg, Ms Evans said: *"The UK government backed by the Labour opposition have been calling for more cuts in the European budget - cuts that would have a disastrous affect on the Welsh economy. I should say that Labour is split on this issue. In Wales where Labour forms the government they are opposing the cuts.*

*"The situation now is that Wales is a net beneficiary of EU funding. Our membership of the EU has helped us in building our economy and like other countries we need that support and solidarity to enable us to overcome the crisis and provide a better future for our young people. That is why I oppose the cuts to the long term budget and support investment in sustainable jobs and communities at the very time when the whole of Europe needs it most."*

**Strengthening the fight against racism, xenophobia and hate crime**

Latvian MEP **Tatjana Ždanoka** took part in a debate at the European Parliament's March plenary session which focussed on the need to tackle racism, hate crimes and xenophobia.

She argued that whilst EU Member States are obliged to punish hate crimes, legal definitions can vary from country to country. This can lead to some people escaping prosecution.

The MEP intervened in the debate to call for change.

Speaking in parliament, Ms Ždanoka said: *"Unfortunately, in many Member States the narrow interpretation given to incitement to hatred in criminal law contributes to hindering the application of this. I will give you one example from my Member State, Latvia: during one anti-fascist meeting, one neo-Nazi stated that Jews and Roma are not human beings and should be exterminated. He was initially sentenced to imprisonment for a breach of the law, which prohibited a charge of incitement to hatred on national and racial grounds; however, the Senate of the Supreme Court later found that the incriminated action constituted incitement, but on ethnic – not national and racial – grounds and acquitted the defendant.*

*"So I would like to stress that there are many violations in the Member States, and this must be dealt with."*

**Turkey should accept outstretched hand**

Flemish nationalist MEP **Mark Demesmaeker** called upon the Turkish government to accept the outstretched hand calling for peace in the Kurdish conflict.

Kurds in Turkey have long been campaigning for more recognition for their language rights and for autonomy. An armed struggle by some sections of Kurdish opinion has been brutally oppressed and the conflict has led to many lives lost over the past decades.

A chance to build a lasting peace seems to have emerged after jailed Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan called for a ceasefire and a withdrawal of Kurdish fighters from Turkey.

N-VA MEP Mark Demesmaeker expressed hope that this could lead towards building a lasting peace: *"This is the first time that we've seen so clear a signal that dialogue comes before armed struggle. That's an important step forward and I hope the Turkish government will accept this outstretched hand which could lead to building a lasting peace."*

But the MEP regretted the rhetoric deployed by the Turkish Prime Minister in stressing the indivisibility of the Turkish state: *"The Turkish constitution is still based around one state, one nation, one language, one*

*flag, and spasmodic mantra Erdogan echoed today. Until the Turkish regime recognised the cultural and linguistic diversity of the country, it seems that Kurdish oppression will continue."*

**Eliminating gender stereotypes**

The March 2013 Strasbourg plenary session also considered the need for EU action to tackle gender stereotypes, and wider questions of equality of opportunity for men and women.

SNP MEP **Ian Hudghton** intervened on the issue to express regret that so much negative attention was being focussed on particular aspects of the proposals, at the risk of losing sight of the key challenges.

The SNP President commented: *"It is clear that gender inequality and gender stereotypes are still common problems in the EU today. The gender pay gap is high, thus the pension gap is also high. Women are under-represented on company boards, under-represented in national governments and in parliaments too - including this one. Reconciling work, family and private life is a huge problem for many women.*

*"More needs to be done at EU and national levels to tackle the many inbuilt barriers to equality of treatment, and I broadly support the calls in this report for more action to be taken. Amidst the widespread press coverage on certain aspects of this report, there is perhaps a chance that sight could be lost of the important issues which it seeks to address. Parliament should vote to remove some of more problematic aspects of the text and favour a final report which maintains a clear focus on tackling gender inequality wherever it exists."*

**European Parliament after 2014**

MEPs have been considering the future shape of the European Parliament after the 2014 elections.

They have already approved plans to move the elections to May in order to avoid a clash with a major public holiday, and try to boost turnout.

But the number of MEPs allocated to existing Member States must be cut to accommodate the arrival of Croatia as the newest EU member. The Lisbon Treaty fixes the maximum number of MEPs at 751.

Belgium is one of the states affected and N-VA MEP **Mark Demesmaeker** is worried that Flanders will be under-represented in Europe as a result.

Pointing to a controversial formula in Belgian legislation that sees Flanders lose out, Demesmaeker says that the number of Flemish MEPs could be cut from 13 to 12. Demesmaeker commented: "*The current calculation method doesn't reflect reality. Why should the democratic principle that all citizens are entitled to equal representation be applied less equally for Flanders? A Flemish voice within the Belgian state increasingly holds less value, it seems."*

**Israel President Speech: Time for action rather than words**

Several EFA MEPs responded to an official address to the European Parliament from Israel's President Shimon Peres during the March Strasbourg plenary session.

Addressing the European Parliament, Israel's Head of State said that it was time to renew the peace process and resume peace negotiations towards a two state solution. He said that Israel would work with the Palestinian authority, and described Palestinian President Abbas and the European Union as partners for peace.

Whilst welcoming the conciliatory tone in parts of the speech, the MEPs emphasised that it's time for

actions rather than words, particularly on halting the building of illegal settlements in occupied Palestinian territory. Three EFA MEPs visited the West Bank and East Jerusalem in October 2012.

EFA Group President **Jill Evans** (Wales) said: *"The biggest obstacle to a two state solution today is Israel's continued settlement expansion in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, in clear violation of international law. It's time for action rather than words. There would be no clearer signal of Israel's commitment to a lasting peace and two state solution than an immediate halt to settlement building and a return to the negotiating table."*

**Francois Alfonsi** (Corsica) said: *"We visited the West Bank and East Jerusalem at the end of 2012. We saw for ourselves the devastating effects of movement restrictions and settlement building on the Palestinian people. Those are the main barriers now to a two state solution. The EU must be ready to use its influence with Israel to get back to the negotiating table and build a political solution."*

**Ana Miranda** (Galicia) said: *"We welcome the clear commitment to a two state solution achieved through negotiation, and the acknowledgement of the EU's role in building peace. But to make peace a reality, we have to see an end to the main obstacles that prevent Israeli and Palestinian representatives restarting direct negotiations. Halting settlement building, particularly in East Jerusalem, would be extremely helpful in moving towards a viable two state solution."*

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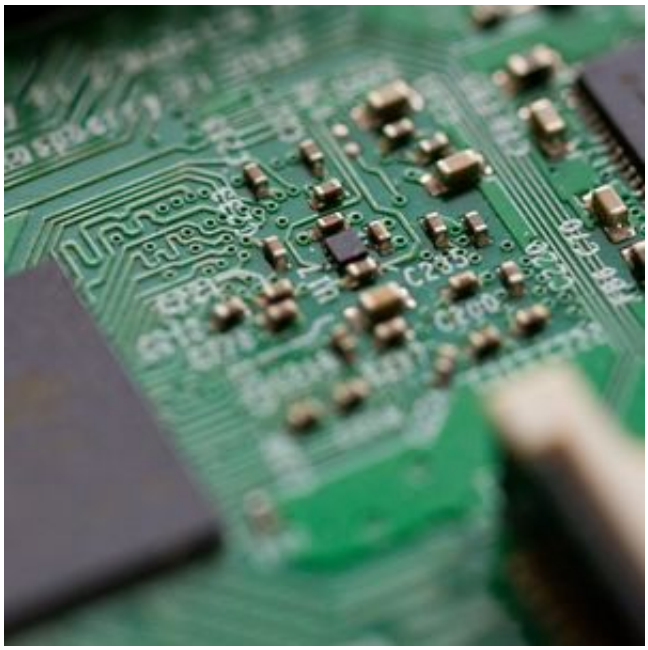


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