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e-fa: News Round Up

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

March/April 2014 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)
- **François Alfonsi MEP** - U Partitu di a Nazione Corsa - Europe Ecologie
- **Mark Demesmaeker MEP** - Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie
- **Inaki Irazabalbeitia MEP** - Aralar
- **Alyn Smith MEP** - Scottish National Party
- **Tatjana Ždanoka MEP** - For Human Rights in a United Latvia



Highlights include:

- Better banking laws
- Dutch language recognition
- No more roaming charges
- Language manifesto
- EU 'own resources'
- Fracking u-turn
- Forced adoptions
- GM honey vote
- Less plastic bags

Better banking laws

Welsh MEP **Jill Evans** supported stronger European laws to protect taxpayers from having to fund bank bailouts in future.

The new legislation shifts the responsibility for risk of failure to the banks themselves and is designed to bring greater stability from now on.

In future, shareholders and creditors will be the first in line to bear any losses from failing banks. Banks will also be required to set up reserve funds which would be used to bailout a bank before seeking taxpayer support.

The new law also updates the deposit guarantee scheme which guarantees people's savings up to a certain level if banks fail. In future banks will be responsible for financing schemes to reimburse savers should a bank fail.

Jill Evans said: *"Never again must taxpayers be forced to foot the bill for the chaos caused by greedy bankers. These new rules, which I've been campaigning for, shift the burden for bailing out banks from taxpayers and onto the shoulders of the banks themselves."*

"Billions of pounds of taxpayers' money was used to bail out the banks, and thousands of people are suffering as a result of the austerity cuts. This must never happen again."

Dutch language recognition

N-VA MEP **Mark Demesmaeker** scored a victory in his campaign to have EU institutions based in bilingual Brussels recognise the Dutch language in their postal address.

The Flemish MEP had complained that EU institutions had been using only the French language versions of their physical addresses. He said that this gave the false impression that Brussels was a French speaking city.

Through a series of parliamentary questions, Demesmaeker challenged the various EU institutions to justify and explain their position.

Both the Council and European Council have now replied and acknowledged the need to use the local official languages.

Demesmaeker was satisfied with the response. He said: *"I know this city well but that's not the case for politicians and officials who come here to work from every corner of Europe. Were they to look at a whole range of official websites and documents from the EU institutions, they'd get the completely wrong impression that this is a monolingual French city. Of course it's not and it's important for the EU institutions to respect the languages of the city where they're based. Brussels is after all an officially bilingual city."*

No more roaming charges

SNP MEP **Ian Hudghton** welcomed the European Parliament's vote to abolish mobile phone roaming charges.

He said that it left Scotland's anti-independence campaign looking even more ridiculous after their scaremongering on the issue.

In June last year, the Westminster Government published an anti-independence paper which claimed that people in Scotland would be forced to pay mobile phone roaming charges when travelling south of the border – just days after the European Commission announced its intention to abolish the charges.

The European Parliament voted to abolish roaming charges across the EU by the end of 2015 and expects final agreement to do so to be reached with member states by the end of this year.

SNP MEP and Party President Ian Hudghton said: *"The big step towards abolishing roaming charges in the EU by the end of 2015 is great news for everyone in Scotland and across the continent – everyone except the No campaign that is."*

"Their claim that people in Scotland would face roaming charges was without doubt one of the silliest scare stories the anti-independence campaign has come up with and this vote in the European Parliament leaves them looking even more foolish."

"As the No campaign's claims get more and more ridiculous, it is no wonder that people in Scotland simply do not take them seriously. I was proud to vote to end roaming charges because I know it will make a real difference to people in Scotland when they travel abroad and face high phone bills."

Language Manifesto

As the Parliamentary term drew to a close, MEPs on the EP's Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages published a manifesto calling for more EU action to protect minority languages and national minority communities.

Several EFA MEPs including **Inaki Irazabalbeitia** and **François Alfonsi** took part.

In the document, the MEPs stress that fundamental freedoms, human rights and equal opportunities should be provided for all citizens of the European Union including persons belonging to minorities.

They noted that national minorities make up 8% of the European Union's population while regional or minority languages are spoken by nearly 50 million people, 10% of the EU population.

They expressed regret that the protection of minorities was not given greater attention in the institutions of the European Union.

EU 'own resources'

The European Parliament held a debate on the vexed issue of 'own resources' during its final plenary session of this mandate. This refers to whether and how much of its own income the EU should be able to raise itself. At the moment the EU is funded by member state contributions. Opinions vary on the issue across parties and political groups.

Corsican MEP **François Alfonsi** spoke in the debate and gave his own view.

Alfonsi said: "This debate leaves a bitter taste in the mouth and feels like a missed opportunity. It follows on from a decision to reduce the EU budget by an unprecedented level. That decision wasn't financial but political.

"The European Parliament bears a significant amount of responsibility for this failure. The main left and right groups pretended to protest, but eventually gave in with little resistance. The EU leaders' summit took little notice of the Parliament's view and this should have encouraged us to take real action. We could have said no. We could have rejected the budget. We could have relaunched the whole question of 'own resources'."

Fracking u-turn

Welsh MEP **Jill Evans** said that a decision to reverse the requirement for so-called 'fracking' exploration to be subject to a compulsory environmental impact assessment was 'an enormous mistake'.

MEPs voted in March to revise EU rules on environmental impact assessments (EIAs). The vote reverses an earlier decision and fails to make EIAs compulsory for shale gas extraction and exploration involving fracking.

Jill Evans and her Greens/EFA group of MEPs voted against the decision.

Responding, Jill Evans said: *"There is massive public opposition to fracking, and very real public concern about the use of this controversial technique. An environmental impact assessment is the very least that should be done. Dropping this requirement could see communities face fracking exploration schemes forced through without proper investigation or consultation. We cannot ignore the environmental and health risks involved with fracking."*

Forced Adoptions

Latvian MEP **Tatjana Ždanoka** took her campaign on forced adoptions to the European Parliament's petitions committee in March.

Dr Ždanoka has taken up the case of several Latvian born women resident in other EU countries who faced the prospect of the forcible removal and forced adoption of their children.

The petitions committee meeting heard emotional testimony from several of the women involved, who are mostly resident in either the UK or the Netherlands.

Concerns were raised about the procedures used by the authorities and the haste with which removals were carried out. The petitioners questioned whether their lack of command of the local language hadn't unfairly counted against them.

GM honey vote

SNP MEP **Alyn Smith** lambasted European Parliament MPs for their decision to allow GM pollen to be present in honey without clear labelling.

The vote in April means that pollen will be considered a constituent rather than an ingredient of honey. As a result, for honey contaminated with GM- pollen, neither the authorisation nor the labelling requirements under EU GMO-legislation will apply.

Commenting, Alyn said: *"This decision regrettably gives Parliament's support to the Commission's proposal. The Commission's push to have pollen considered as a constituent rather than an ingredient of honey is hugely disappointing. It shows blatant disregard for wider EU efforts to provide clearer product labelling and for a previous ECJ ruling of 2011 on this issue.*

"This result is bad news for beekeepers and consumers alike. Despite a huge degree of public uncertainty, we will see an increasing number of GM products making their way onto our shelves unlabelled."

Less plastic bags

The European Parliament wants to dramatically reduce the use of plastic bags and has brought forward concrete proposals

In 2010, people in Europe on used on average 176 plastic bags per person. The European Parliament wants this halved by 2018 and reduced by 80% by 2020.

N-VA MEP **Mark Demesmaeker**, a member of the EP's Environment Committee, wants the EU to get to grips with the 'plastic mountain'.

Mark said: *"At least eight billion plastic bags end up as waste in the EU every year. This causes enormous environmental damage, particularly to our seas. Setting targets for reduction at EU level can give an important impetus towards dealing with this serious problem. Certainly things vary from country to country. I'm pleased to say that Flanders sets a particularly good example and that plastic bag use has declined by more than 86% over the past decade."*

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