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e-fa News Round-Up April/May 2011

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

Key issues in April and early May included:

- SNP landslide victory at Scottish elections
- Middle East - Syria, Bahrain, Yemen
- Imported radioactive fish
- Promoting democracy in the Basque Country
- Fish discards
- EFA General Assembly
- No to EU-wide constituency
- Europe without borders should remain in place
- European Parliament Open Day

SNP landslide victory at Scottish elections

The SNP will form a majority government following its landslide victory in the Scottish Parliament elections held on 5 May. The party took 69 seats in an election that saw the unionist parties decimated. The SNP led by Alex Salmond now has a majority over all of the other parties.

Amongst the new SNP MSPs is Aileen McLeod, a former EFA colleague in the European Parliament who was elected to represent the South of Scotland region.

In Wales, Plaid Cymru lost four seats in the elections to the National Assembly for Wales, returning a total of 11 members out of sixty. The party has been in coalition government with Labour for the past four years.

Middle East - Syria, Bahrain, Yemen

MEPs debated the situation in the Middle East at the April Strasbourg plenary session, and in particular events unfolding in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. The European Commission set out three fundamental principles to guide its policy in relation to the evolving situation, namely a rejection of violence, promotion of dialogue and fundamental political and economic reforms from within.

N-VA MEP Frieda Brepoels took part in the debate and roundly criticised the European Commission's weak response. Speaking in parliament, Frieda said: "I listened with some surprise as the minister laid out those three principles. Frankly at this point in time, a call for dialogue is not going to make much of a difference and is really not credible. I think the European Commission should take a much stronger line to pressing for democratic reform. We hear that the high representative has regular official contact, but in what manner is she maintaining contact with civil society?"

"As other colleagues have said, the European Union must stop the export of arms to the region. When we see that, for example, last year more than a hundred million euro's worth of weapons were sold to Yemen by no less than eight European member states, what is the point of having a common European approach to weapons exports?"

Imported radioactive fish

SNP President Ian Hudgton expressed concern in early April after the European Commission confirmed their fears over possible radioactivity in imported fish. The Commission has already required strict monitoring of all fisheries imports from regions of Japan directly affected by the events at the Fukushima nuclear plant. However they have also expressed concerns about radioactivity spreading to the wider Pacific and have sought scientific advice on the possible impact.

Ian commented: "Europe produces large quantities of its own fisheries products, much of it of course coming from Scotland. However we also import a lot to keep up with modern consumer demands. The Commission's increased monitoring regime set up in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster is reassuring. Nevertheless, the wider impact of the accident is truly frightening. The Commission have often tried to justify the existence of the CFP using the line that 'fish know no borders'. Radioactivity too knows no borders and there is a serious possibility that the Fukushima leaks will have serious effects across the Pacific Ocean."

Promoting democracy in the Basque Country

EFA MEPs were active throughout April in highlighting the democratic deficit in Spain with the decision of the Spanish Supreme Court to disallow candidates from the left wing coalition Bildu from standing in upcoming elections. They condemned the decision as wrong in principle, undemocratic and contrary to the core values of the European Union.

The Spanish Supreme Court decided to ban the Bildu coalition from standing in forthcoming local and provincial elections in the Basque Country on the pretext of alleged links to extremists. Yet the coalition includes democratic parties committed to a peaceful resolution of the Basque conflict and who have previously condemned violence.

François Alfonsi, said at the time: "This decision risks depriving Basque voters of a truly democratic choice at the forthcoming elections and could jeopardise a fragile peace process. We are talking about parties who are committed to democratic principles and to a peaceful resolution of the Basque conflict."

Frieda Brepoels said: "This declaration is symptomatic of the democratic deficit in the Spanish state where democratic, peaceful parties which condemn violence can still be declared illegal. The decision of the Spanish Supreme Court is very worrying. The Bildu coalition was formed following an agreement amongst legal parties who support non-violent progress towards a peaceful resolution of the Basque conflict."

Frieda organised an open letter from MEPs on the situation addressed to the President of the European

Commission, President of the European Council and the Prime Minister of Spain. The letter drew signatures from MEPs in five different political groups and said: "We call upon the Spanish Government, the European Council and the European Commission to work to ensure that free and fair elections may be held in all parts of the EU, and express our particular concern at the current situation regarding political parties in the Basque Country."

Following this intense pressure, the Spanish Constitutional Court overturned the lower court's earlier decision and decided to allow Bildu to take part in the elections. Frieda hailed the decision as a "victory for democracy and basic liberties." EFA MEPs organised a press conference in Strasbourg to highlight the issue.

Fish discards

SNP MEP Ian Hudghton dismay after the European Parliament backed moves by the European Commission to extend flawed fisheries regulations for a further 18 months. The regulations force fishermen to discard perfectly marketable fish into the sea. At present it is estimated that some 42% of marketable haddock caught off the west coast of Scotland is dumped overboard.

The Scottish government - backed by the fishing industry - had been campaigning to amend the rules to reduce discards and allow sustainable scallop fishing. However the Commission - with the support of the UK Labour party - refused to allow any changes to the existing failed legislation.

Ian said: "Extending these deeply flawed rules for a further 18 months quite simply means another 18 months of dumping fish over the side. The Commission has recently been vocal in its condemnation of discard but in reality they are being utterly hypocritical. The Scottish government, with the backing of fishermen and politicians from across Europe, had made suggestions to improve the situation. However, these were ignored by the Commission - just as the fishing industry has been ignored for decades."

EFA General Assembly

The EFA European political held its annual General Assembly in Mariehamn in the Aland Islands on Friday 15 April, just two days before Finland's general election. With some 30,000 inhabitants, Aland is an autonomous, demilitarised, Swedish speaking part of Finland which has its own parliament. The parliament building - the Lagting - was the venue for EFA's gathering which drew together participants from over 30 of Europe's stateless nations, regions and linguistic minorities.

EFA Political Party President Eric Defoort said: "With peace as a cornerstone principle of EFA it's no coincidence that we are celebrating our 30th anniversary this year in the Aland islands. The islands stand as a symbol for peace with a demilitarised and neutral statute since 1856, confirmed by the League of Nations in 1921."

EFA Parliamentary Group President Jill Evans said: "We're delighted to be holding this annual event in the Aland Islands for the very first time and I want to thank our local party Alands Framtid for their invitation and hard work. Working together at European level is vital in advancing the cause of Europe's nations, regions and minorities given that the EU is responsible for so many decisions that affect us all on a local level."

No to EU-wide constituency

Flemish MEP Frieda Brepoels criticised proposals for a Europe-wide European parliamentary constituency electing 25 new MEPs. Frieda expressed concerns that the proposal which originated from an English liberal deputy could be detrimental to Europe's regions and stateless nations.

Frieda commented: "Arguing for 25 extra MEPs is unacceptable in times when savings need to be made. Above all, a single European constituency will not bring people closer to the European decision making process. It will instead provide a platform for politicians who want to set themselves far apart from the problems people face in daily life and move towards a European superstate."

Europe without borders should remain in place

In early May the European Commission adopted a strategy paper on migration, describing its vision of migration issues in view of the current situation in the Southern Mediterranean, as well as outlining further proposals. As regards the Schengen area, the paper raised the prospect of some temporary reintroductions of border controls within the zone.

EFA MEP Tatjana Ždanoka, who is also the Greens/EFA group rapporteur on Schengen matters, emphasised that temporary reintroduction of internal border control should only be used as a last resort in truly critical situations.

Tatjana said: "The decision on resuming checks at internal borders is to be adopted at the European level rather than by Member States themselves, as stipulated by the legislation currently in force. But it is not enough to establish such a decision-making procedure. It should be supplemented by very strict criteria. Europe without borders is one of the most important EU projects, and it should not be undermined."

The Schengen Agreement between Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany was signed in 1985. The Convention based on it took effect in 1995. Schengen cooperation has been incorporated into the EU legal framework in 1997. Currently the Schengen area without internal border control consists of 25 States. All the EU Member States except for Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, Romania and the United Kingdom belong to the area, with Bulgaria and Romania possibly joining in 2011. Iceland, Norway and Switzerland also are members of the area.

European Parliament Open Day

Well over a thousand people stopped by at the EFA stand at the European Parliament Open Day in Brussels on Saturday 7 May.

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